

**EPISODE 130**

[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](https://onepitch.co) and look for the video page to learn more about our new video series featuring journalists from the show.

Joining us today on Coffee with a Journalist is Blake Montgomery. He is the tech news editor at Gizmodo, where he oversees a team of reporters covering technology news. During the episode, Blake shares about his love of writing, his recommendation for building a working relationship together, his honest opinion on embargoes, and lots more. Let's hear from Blake now.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:01:13] BB:** Welcome, everyone. I'm Beck Bamberger, here with OnePitch. You're listening to Coffee with a Journalist. Hopefully, you have some coffee. Maybe just to drink. Maybe some water. Whatever it is, you're here to listen to some great insights from our journalists and media friends who are helping us become better publicists, better PR people. Because we all need each other here. That's why we started this.

I happened to run BAM, an agency. We work with publicists, journalists all the time. Working with venture-backed technology companies. And I also started OnePitch, because I saw definitely the need here to help our relationships be better in our relationships with journalists and media.

Blake Montgomery is here with us today. He's the Tech News Editor at Gizmodo. We're going to talk about what is Gizmodo in case you need a refresher there. And actually, Blake, you actually

came from literature and letters from Stanford University as your BA. Can we start with that? And Welcome. Welcome. First that, and then what's these letters mean from Stanford University?

**[00:02:17] BM:** Thanks for having me.

**[00:02:18] BB:** Yes.

**[00:02:19] BM:** I studied English literature, creative writing, at Stanford University as an undergraduate. I mean, initially, I didn't really want to be a journalist. I was on the high school paper. And what you write about as a high school journalist is sort of circumscribed, you're writing about sports, or teachers who have hobbies, or in the rare case, like a social issue as in intersects with your class, which is only 100 people, Or in the case of my high school, is only 100 people.

Versus as an adult journalist, like the world is your oyster. You can really pick whatever you want to write about. And just as long as you're interested, that comes through in your writing. And you write about stuff with stakes. You write about, like in the case of technology journalism, you write about people investing millions and millions of dollars. You write about this technology that affects billions of people and how they go about their daily lives.

**[00:03:11] BB:** Yes. That's a lot of power.

**[00:03:13] BM:** Yeah. And that is so fascinating, and so much more fun. And there's a lot of like romp. There's a lot of like romping to be had as an adult as a journalist writing about stuff. I am particularly fond of like tabloid news and take a lot of inspiration from like the New York Post. And so, writing about stuff in a fun way really gets through to a reader, I think.

But when I came out of high school, I wanted to be a novelist. And so, I studied creative writing, and a lot of other different stuff because I didn't really think that being a novelist or a creative writer was a very serious thing to do. It took me a while to like commit to that major. But then once I graduated, I realized that no one would proactively pay me to write novels. I remember having a conversation with an agent once and she said, "Can you send me your manuscript?"

And I said, "What manuscript?" And so, it was a very rude awakening into seeing that you needed to have the thing before someone would pay you for the thing. And so, I kind of returned to journalism and found that, really, I liked it a lot more than I had in high school. That's a long way of answering your question, I think. But that's how I came to it.

**[00:04:29] BB:** Wow, okay. Thank you for that answer. I just saw when I see here "literature letters." I was like, "Wow! What do you get a degree in letters for?" My goodness.

**[00:04:40] BM:** I like to joke. I like to joke that it's verbal engineering.

**[00:04:44] BB:** Verbal engineering. Oh! Elevated right there. I like that.

**[00:04:48] BM:** Right. Most people who go to Stanford study the sciences, especially computer science. And so, it's sort of in weird company to be an English major.

**[00:04:56] BB:** Tell us, for those maybe not as familiar, Blake, what does Gizmodo all encompass?

**[00:05:02] BM:** We've got a pretty wide mandate. My desk covers technology. Things like Sheryl Sandberg resigning. Or this past week, it was a lot of that drama about Instagram's recent changes. The Kardashians saying we don't like the new Instagram. Instagram rolling things back very apologetically. Mark Zuckerberg saying it's about to be –

**[00:05:25] BB:** Like, how embarrassing? You're like, "Ah shit, the Kardashians totally told me." Hand slap. Hand slap. Revert. Revert.

**[00:05:31] BM:** Yeah. And it was really an exhibition of their muscle as like some of the most followed people on social media. I mean, if you can't please your power users, then you're probably not going to please your casual users either.

**[00:05:46] BB:** Yeah, exactly. Plus, when you think about the combined following of that enterprise, I mean, that's, frankly, billions of people, I think.

**[00:05:55] BM:** It's over 500 million people who follow the Kardashian sisters.

**[00:05:59] BB:** Yeah. I was just going to say. Is it up to a billion? Oh, yeah. I would say it's almost to a billion, when you add them all up.

**[00:06:02] BM:** Yeah, probably. Because it was like Kylie, Kim and Kourtney who shared that meme that was like make Instagram Instagram again. And that's probably up to 750 million, which we know whole empire, it's definitely a billion people following them on Instagram alone.

**[00:06:16] BB:** Insane.

**[00:06:17] BM:** But anyway, Gizmodo also does like reviews of – We have a consumer tech desk. We also cover climate change in a desk called Earther. We cover science. And then there's a website that's all into its own that's under our umbrella called io9 that covers like genre entertainment. So, the Marvel Universe. Or I wrote something for them about the death of the creator of a trading card game that was especially dear to me. Or they just did a huge series about Comic-Con. We have a pretty wide range of stuff that I would categorize all under health, tech, science, nerd, entertainment.

**[00:06:52] BB:** Nerd. General category, nerd. Perfect.

**[00:06:55] BM:** Yeah, basically. You could probably say that about Gizmodo in general.

**[00:06:59] BB:** 100%. 100%. Okay. Now, Blake, you are now an editor. So that is sometimes a little different than being a reporter in terms of the volume of pitches, but sometimes, frankly, not. How is your inbox?

**[00:07:14] BM:** Mine is fine. I think because it's relatively new. I started as an editor earlier this year. It's not particularly inundated. I do notice that it is the volume and it is growing. But yeah, it is quite different. As a reporter, I disregarded a lot of pitches, honestly. But as an editor, I will read them because I'm like, "Oh, do I want to assign this?" As an editor, I'm responsible for a much wider breadth of subject matter for all of my different reporters who are covering different things, like cybersecurity, or surveillance, or like online communities and influencers.

I need to read the pitches and say, “Is this a big development on their beat? Like, do I need to assign this to someone?” Whereas when I was a reporter, I was only responsible for one subject matter. If I was not really covering influencers, if I wasn't really writing stories about influencers, I wouldn't be like taking a lot of pitches about social media, or power users, or online creators. I'd be like, “Give me the cybersecurity stuff.”

**[00:08:19] BB:** Give me that stuff. Do you then have any system in which you file pitches? Or are you a master leader? Just blow it out of the water? What would you say?

**[00:08:31] BM:** I mean, I'll read most of the stuff just sort of. I don't really have a filing system. I've never been very good at managing an email inbox, as my family could attest. Especially during like tax season when we all do our taxes together. I will read them all. I will read probably like a third to a half, to be honest with you. It's really important for all the public that's listening to like have a punchy lead. Like, just get into the meat of what you're talking about. Don't tell me happy Monday. Just get into the subject matter. I know what we're here to do.

**[00:09:03] BB:** Yes. We know the format of the transaction here. Yes. Yes.

**[00:09:07] BM:** Right. Exactly. And we don't have to have any illusions about that.

**[00:09:10] BB:** Yeah. I hear that more and more from people. Absolutely. Just I don't need a happy Monday. Oh, how was your weekend? Oh, how was it? No, just boom! Go.

**[00:09:20] BM:** Yeah. If we have a relationship and have met in-person or corresponded before, then it's more like, I guess, appropriate. Though that sounds very stern. But it's more – Yeah, it's more of the vibe to be like, “Hey, how are you doing? I'm working on this thing.” Versus if we're cold emailing for the first time, it's like, “I'm working on this. What do you think of this story?”

**[00:09:41] BB:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah, that's it. That's it. Oh, I love it like, Blake. Okay, we already covered our relationship building stuff. And that's in another video. Everyone needs to look at that. Are exclusives or embargoes ever something you like?

**[00:09:58] BM:** Definitely, especially exclusives. If there's 'exclusive' in the subject line of an email, I'm like 10 times more likely to click on it and read it more thoroughly. Because if we're the only outlet getting that story, then we are – We look like we are covering something more thoroughly better than other outlets, because we are the only ones with access to a story. And in the sort of chain reaction of a story getting published, one thing that we really look for as a measure of success is whether someone else will write up our story and link to it, aggregate it as we say.

And so, if it's an exclusive, we're a lot more likely to be aggregated because someone's like, "Oh, we need that story on our site. Let's write that up. We'll link to Gizmodo." If someone is pitching me an exclusive, I'm like, "I'm thinking about what that story will do for us." And I'm saying that's a much higher likelihood that we will get something that we want out of that pitch.

And embargoes, embargoes are also useful in that we can publish our coverage right when everyone else is. And we can say, "We're on top of this story as well." It's less cool. It's less prestigious to be like one of five people. But it's a lot better than like five people publishing a story that you're like, "Oh, we needed to cover that. And we were left out of the embargo." And so, now we're just like late. Because the game is speed in what we do, especially online.

[BREAK]

**[00:11:31] ANNOUNCER:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways one pitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) to learn about our new one pitch 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 CONTINUED]

**[00:11:55] BB:** Yes, absolutely. For you, Blake, as you're thinking about, "Oh, here's the story I really want to write." And you've talked about a little bit of just, man, everything from card games, from nostalgia, to what are the Kardashians saying today, to Twitter wins round one in court thing with Musk thing going on. Like, I'm looking at some of your Twitter stuff, which that's

an ongoing saga as well. How do you think about, “Wow, this is a story I want to write this week or this month?”

**[00:12:23] BM:** It's a good question. I think about is it a story that's going to have follow-ups, corollaries, things that – Is it ongoing, basically? Twitter and Musk, for example. That's a – Lawsuits, journalists loves write about lawsuits, because there is like an established process for how this will go. There is a winner and a loser. Everyone is forced to tell the truth, which is great. And so, a lawsuit is a great example of like is this story ongoing? Will we need to cover further developments? And so, do we need to have this trail of coverage for our readers to be like, “Oh, I know what this is. I'm interested. Is there going to be a lot of fallout from a given story is a big thing that I think about.

**[00:13:05] BB:** Okay. A lot of fallout from it. And fun fact on – Yeah, we like lawsuits. Although – I'm thinking of like the fairness case, and how long that whole thing unraveled for and the reporters who must have had to be in there every day. Do you ever think like, “Oh, my God, what if I get assigned?” Well, you're the editor. So, that's a little different. But what if you got assigned to a trial that lasted five and a half months?

**[00:13:32] BM:** I have. When I was covering a different type of technology, when I covered like right wing extremism, I was at the Charlottesville white nationalist riots. And then a year later, I covered the trial of the driver basically gavel to gavel. And that lasted only three weeks. It's not five and a half months. It's not Theranos where there is just – There was so much discovery involved in that case, and so many documents. It was so kind of like ponderous in the weight and like length of it.

But I have like sat in a trial for jury selection listening to all the arguments. And I mean, it's honestly awesome. It's so fun. You're just really in the white, hot center of the thing that is happening. And everyone wants to know –

**[00:14:15] BB:** Oh. So, you're down. You like it.

**[00:14:18] BM:** Yeah. It's quite fun. I mean, there's nothing more fun as a journalist than to –

**[00:14:21] BB:** Well, it's the live drama. It's a live drama. Yeah.

**[00:14:22] BM:** Yeah, exactly. And like I said, you're watching people compete and you say, "They made these arguments. These people made these arguments. This stuff surfaced, and we've never seen it before. And it relates to this." And so, I mean, trials are very gladiatorial. They're just like kind of enthralling to watch.

**[00:14:39] BB:** Kind of agree with that. Like the Johnny Depp thing. Everyone loved that.

**[00:14:43] BM:** Everyone was glued to that. It was the biggest – Much to our chagrin at Gizmodo, we were not covering the depth of her trial. And we noticed that everyone was looking at that and not at the stuff that we were covering. Like, bummer. This is not really within our purview.

There's nothing more fun as a journalist and to be at the white, hot center of something as it is happening and then to like be among the first with the information and to be at the event. I mean, a lot of technology scoops are information that is like passed on to you by a source and you couldn't have been in the boardroom at the Uber, like, vote where they dismissed Travis Kalanick. Versus like being at a trial, you're watching the thing happen with your very own eyes.

**[00:15:24] BB:** You're getting it first. Like, first, firsthand. Dang! That makes me excited, like, "Ooh, how can I get assigned to do a trial?" Important thing. Damn, well, it's not my job. But –

**[00:15:37] BM:** We can listen to the Musk Twitter trial in Delaware Chancery Court, which we did. And so that was what gave rise to that story that you were talking about like Twitter wins round one. We were listening as it happened. Like, "Oh, this is a big deal. This is not a big deal."

**[00:15:49] BB:** Yes. Oh, on the edge of your seats.

**[00:15:52] BN:** Yeah.



[00:15:53] **BB:** Oh, man. Anyway. Okay. I like that. Blake, what are you reading right now for fun? Or watching for fun? Or podcast for fun? Whatever. We just like to hear how you consume stories.

[00:16:07] **BM:** Sure. Let's see. For fun, I listen to the podcast *Who? Weekly*, which is about like D-list celebrities. In the mornings, I listen to – And I love celebrity gossip. There's a lot that reporters can learn. There's a lot that reporters can learn from celebrity gossip if they wouldn't be so high-minded about it.

[00:16:26] **BB:** 100%. 100%.

[00:16:29] **BM:** In the mornings I listened to like NPR's *Up First* and *ABC Start Here* to kind of get an idea of like, what are the big threads of the stories going on are the biggest stories in the nation. I'm reading – Alongside a friend, I'm reading this book called *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is this like ponderous novel from the 1970s by Thomas Pynchon. And I just watched –

[00:16:49] **BB:** *Gravity's Rainbow*. Okay. hold on. I'm going to look it up on Audible. How do you like it? Is it dystopia-shish? What would you say?

[00:16:56] **BM:** Not yet. I'm not really far. I just started.

[00:16:58] **BB:** Okay. Okay. Okay. It's a 37-hour one on Audible. It's a big one. Big boy.

[00:17:03] **BM:** It's about like rockets, and bombs, and paranoia in the 1970s. And it's kind of like *Moby Dick* and that it's like it's just packed with allusions to all sorts of other stuff, which is something that I really liked the book.

[00:17:16] **BB:** I love it. It did win, by the way, though. Winner of the 1973 National Book Awards. *Gravity's Rainbow* is a postmodern epic. Okay. Wow. All right. Continue. What are you watching?

[00:17:28] **BM:** I was watching the show – This was a while ago now, I guess. But *Under the Banner of Heaven*, which is about murders.

[00:17:34] **BB:** Oh, how was that? Yes.

[00:17:37] **BM:** I loved it. And I'm really looking forward to Netflix's adaptation of The Sandman, which was a graphic novel that I loved a long time ago. That's coming out later this week.

[00:17:46] **BB:** Yes. Wow. Okay. I like it. Quite a wide appetite and palette there you have for the stories, Blake. Okay.

[00:17:54] **BM:** I love content of all threads.

[00:17:55] **BB:** Yeah. Me too. Okay. Speaking of fun, this is kind of something new that we're asking type of people, like, what do you do besides your journalist job? Like, for fun?

[00:18:06] **BM:** This is also work, I suppose. But it is like my main hobby. I write fiction. I write science fiction. I'm working on this collection of stories. It's about an alternate reality where like resurrection is a very commonplace medical practice. So, people can just come back to life. I also like to do like running in yoga. And that's like sort of boring.

[00:18:30] **BB:** Yeah. Yeah. No. It keeps you fit and healthy. That's good. Sane, probably?

[00:18:35] **BM:** And it's kind of the only time when I'm not thinking about work is when I'm in like physical pain. So, that's helpful.

[00:18:43] **BB:** Hey, keeps you focused. Keeps you focused. I like it.

[00:18:47] **BM:** I also watch a lot of TikTok, which is both work and fun.

[00:18:51] **BB:** Yeah, I could see. Both of it. Do you have a favorite influencer on there by chance?

[00:18:57] **BM:** Oh, a good question. Let's see.

**[00:18:59] BB:** There are so many.

**[00:18:59] BM:** There are so many. Oh, actually, you know what? I don't remember his name. But there is someone who I recently followed who goes on a lot of hikes in Scotland and narrates them in Gaelic. Or I think it's pronounced Gallic actually, which I didn't realize. There's a niche for everything. It's so soothing to listening to.

**[00:19:15] BB:** Wow! The whole time? So, as he's hiking up, he is still huffing and puffing and saying whatever he needs?

**[00:19:22] BM:** Very much so. He obviously gets like more and more winded as time goes on in the video, which is quite funny. And he has like subtitles in English. Obviously, I don't speak Gallic. So that's fine. Tiktok is also an amazing like engine for music discovery. And I love listening to music and going to concerts. And so, that, I'm like very excited. That is very fun.

**[00:19:45] BB:** Okay. Again, wide palate appetite. Okay. Blake, we did not go into pitches a little bit more than that. And I wanted to loop back on that. And then, also just like your favorite subject line. Let me cycle back to that. For you, what would you say are the three must-have elements of a good pitch?

**[00:20:06] BM:** Must-have elements of a good pitch are why it matters outside of like your company or to the wider world? If you can tie it to an ongoing news story. As an old editor of mine used to say, like, can you touch the third rails of American culture? Like, what will electrify your story and make me say, "Oh, of course we need to cover this." That's like the biggest one. Kind of like I was saying earlier, like a punchy lead. Like, get right into what is this about. We don't need to like kind of wind through a narrative in a pitch.

I mean, those are basically the biggest ones. And this is very vague. The kind of overarching one is like – And very vaguely, is like, is this a compelling story? Is this a compelling narrative? Does it have a beginning, middle and an end? Does it have a character that we can like identify with? In the case of companies, it's like what is the journey of your CEO to this thing that is happening? Which is tough. I mean, a lot of businesses like do boring things that are not tied to personal journeys.

And so, it's tough to like craft a narrative that people will believe. But on that same note, I mean, like Theranos was nothing if not narrative. It's like this genius, Stanford dropout who dresses like Steve Jobs, was afraid of needles. And it's like, "Oh, wow! That's a really great pitch, unfortunately."

**[00:21:28] BB:** Yeah, unfortunately. Oh, man. Okay. Those are the elements. Now, you said the beginning, the middle, the end. Does it have a character? Do you want that spelled out in a pitch just to be clear? Or is that your thinking? Okay.

**[00:21:40] BM:** It can. I mean, it's what I'm thinking about. If someone is writing, it's sort of like an Axio story of like bullet point, bullet point, bullet point. And it says the beginning of the story, the middle, and like the end is where we are now, or the end will be our future success. We're on the verge of this. And this might be about to happen. Or this huge thing has happened in American culture, law, technology. And like we are at the crest of that wave. Our company is at the crest of that wave. And this is about to happen. Like, I'm not opposed to it. Like I was saying, like, you can be very blunt in a pitch.

**[00:22:16] BB:** Okay. Want. We like it. And go straight to it. Okay. You also mentioned on the video a little series we did, which everyone can check out and see. A little bit about relationship building with you and a subject line. You actually gave a shout-out to one of your favorite subject lines. I do like to cover it here, though. For you a subject, and you talk about it a little bit about exclusives, but a subject line, you're like, "Damn, that's a good subject line." What does such a subject line include?

**[00:22:39] BM:** A lot of them have what they are about in the first one or two words. Study; The United States government makes far more requests than other comparable governments of technology companies. Pitch; spoiled nostalgia at Elon Musk's charging stations exclusive. Whatever that exclusive is. I mean, you guys sent me – Your subject line was 'podcast guest'. And then I don't remember the rest of the subject line. But I clicked on it because I was like, "I would like to be a podcast guest."

**[00:23:08] BB:** There you go. Yes. Yes. Okay. It sounds like it's a mixture, but it gets to the point. And it gets what the ask is. Yeah, I like it. Okay. Blake, finally, in our last question to wrap us up here. What do you think the future of journalism is?

**[00:23:27] BM:** It's a great question. I mean, there are pieces of journalism that will carry forward into the future forever. Like a scoop and an exclusive will always carry currency, whatever format they are delivered in. I mean, if you have a video interview that has a piece of information that we've never heard before, that's going to get written up and like taken up by a bunch of other outlets. I mean, the way that reporters, like more than ever, build their own brands, is by getting stories that nobody else has, whether that's through their own – As an old editor of mine used to say, like, conceptual scoops. Whether they can frame a trend in a way that no one else has seen. Whether it's information that they can pry from a source via documents, or reporting, or getting a pitch from the company that they have like written about quite a lot.

More than ever, the world of journalism is like scoop-driven. And that's what gets people's attention in a very crowded place. You're like, I have to go to a place where I am getting information that I cannot get anywhere else.” So that is both the past and the future, in my opinion. I said I was very fascinated with like tabloids and celebrity gossip. And like, that's something that they have trafficked in forever. And it's something that like the rest of journalism is sort of been up to in a weird way of like a tabloid exclusive of like insider sources are saying. Or an exclusive interview with this person, this celebrity that you definitely want to read. Like, the rest stuff the journalism world, the rest of the journalism world that thinks itself more serious than that, is like, “Whoa! We all need exclusives all the time now.”

**[00:25:09] BB:** We do need excuses all the time. One follow-up to that though, is where does that tablet obsession of yours come from? I'm just curious.

**[00:25:20] BM:** I know. It's very gauche of me. But I mean, they're just like having more fun than everybody else, and sometimes in like problematic ways, which is unfortunate.

**[00:25:29] BB:** Yes, absolutely. Yes. Very true. Very true.

[00:25:32] **BM:** That is the darker side. But they're just like having a great time.

[00:25:37] **BB:** They're just having a good time.

[00:25:38] **BM:** Yeah.

[00:25:39] **BB:** Are they though? I wonder. I wonder. That's just me though. Well, Blake, you have been a total delight here. I love hearing all about Gizmodo and how you have the nerd sections. Definitely, everyone needs to check that out. Plus, your fiction writing. Is that coming out anytime soon? Can we find this somewhere?

[00:25:59] **BM:** That collection is not coming out for a hot minute or for a minute. But I have published several short stories, invites, that you can go figure, that you can go read.

[00:26:07] **BB:** Okay. Do you want to give a shout out for anything, by the way? Like, anything to follow? Anything to see you on?

[00:26:13] **BM:** You can follow me on Twitter @blakersdozen. And my Instagram handle is the same. My TikTok is also that. But it is like sort of inactive. I'm much more of a consumer on TikTok.

[00:26:25] **BB:** Okay. That's fine.

[00:26:26] **BM:** But Instagram and Twitter are where I'm more active.

[00:26:30] **BB:** Excellent. Blake Montgomery, Tech News Editor from Gizmodo, thank you so much.

[00:26:36] **BM:** Thanks for having me. This was delightful.

[OUTRO]

**[00:26:39] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Blake Montgomery from Gizmodo. 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.

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[END]