

**EPISODE 184**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER:** Hi, everyone, and welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious how OnePitch can help you find relevant journalists to pitch, including some of the guests on this podcast? Head to our website at [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) to learn more.

Today's guest on Coffee with a Journalist is Bree Fowler from CNET. As a senior reporter, Bree specializes in digital security and privacy. She also covers smartphones, wearable technology, and other emerging tech. During the episode, Bree talks about building relationships through face-to-face meetings, filing pitches that she can reference later on, timelines it can take to read through reports and briefs and write up a story, and more. Let's hear from Bree now.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:00:58] BB:** Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. Hopefully, you're here to listen to another great journalist dish about all her, in this case, pet peeves and promises and likes and dislikes about publicists because we learn so much here as we do every time. With us today, we have the Senior Writer of Cybersecurity and Digital Privacy from CNET, Bree Fowler. Got it there, Miss Bree. Welcome to our little show.

**[00:01:27] BF:** Thanks for having me.

**[00:01:28] BB:** Yes. Okay, Bree. First, I always like to ask, for people maybe not as familiar, what would you say encompasses the coverage of CNET because it's quite broad?

**[00:01:40] BF:** Right. CNET primarily is a consumer-focused tech publication, everything that your average everyday person or people who are obsessed with technology even want to read about when it comes to all kinds of technology.

**[00:01:56] BB:** Excellent. Specifically more for you, cybersecurity and digital privacy. I see, though, that you've got quite an array of articles like an AI helped you find your running shoes for the New York City Marathon.

**[00:02:11] BF:** That is true. Kind of like CNET has given me the ability to kind of branch out and do what I want to do, as long as it falls within their purview, writing about artificial intelligence. Basically, this was so I could get the office to buy me a new pair of trainers.

**[00:02:29] BB:** Hey, we'll take it.

**[00:02:30] BF:** Yes. I mean, I love trying out new kinds of tech. I have a background in testing and consumer tech in general. I go to CES frequently. I previously worked at Consumer Reports, where we were all about the science of devices. So I still like to dabble in other kinds of tech coverage as well.

**[00:02:50] BB:** Including the running shoes and beyond. I like that. Oh, and by the way, like you then had another article, How Runners Can Stay Safe Online and on the Streets. Are you a runner?

**[00:03:00] BF:** Yes. I am running the New York City Marathon. Knock on wood.

**[00:03:05] BB:** It is a great marathon. I ran a few years ago. Nothing beats it.

**[00:03:09] BF:** This will be my first marathon.

**[00:03:11] BB:** Oh, you're starting at the top. Oh, my God, Bree. Oh. There's nothing like it.

**[00:03:18] BF:** I got into running during the pandemic, and I have a great supportive running group that basically peer-pressured me into this.

**[00:03:26] BB:** Good. Oh, I'm so excited for you.

**[00:03:29] BF:** But it's **[inaudible 00:03:29]** that I get to try lots of new kinds of tech and dealing with whether it's AI picking out shoes because anyone who runs is generally obsessed with sneakers and finding the perfect fit and things like that. But also, apps like Strava which are super popular with consumers. A lot of the run clubs use them here, but they're also hoovering up tons and tons of personal data, and what are the repercussions, both when it comes to your privacy. But also, as a woman who runs alone in the Bronx, there is a personal security, physical security issue there too.

**[00:04:08] BB:** Okay. This is good to know. Speaking of, since you are in New York City, is there a way to make a relationship with you? Do you want to go for coffee runs, coffee and runs? I don't know.

**[00:04:21] BF:** I love meeting PR people face to face, experts face to face when they're in town. It lets me kind of get a read of a person. When it comes to PR people, it's letting them know what I do because what I do is, well, I kind of have my tentacles into lots of things these days. Security and tech touch so many different things. There's a lot of stuff that I do not cover and I do not want to be pitched on. So it's a good way to just establish a relationship with people. When I meet people in person, I tend to return their emails later too.

**[00:04:57] BB:** Yes. So meeting in person is key. Good to know. Of course, when you're in New York City, maybe easier for people if you happen to be coming in the city or whatnot. You're based there, et cetera. How about your inbox, though, Bree? Is it a disaster? Or are you an inbox zero ninja?

**[00:05:16] BF:** I took a four-day weekend. When I logged on this morning, I had 190 emails.

**[00:05:23] BB:** Okay. That's actually not that crazy to me but – well, what's the percentage of pitches, I guess?

**[00:05:30] BF:** I would say about half of them were pitches. I tried to do an audit of this this morning when I was going through things. I mean, a lot of it is newsletters, and I get a lot of sales emails from cybersecurity companies who think that I'm in the business. So that's an automatic delete, send to junk folder kind of thing. I get a lot of phishing emails. I don't know if

that has to do with what I do or just the fact that as a reporter, our email addresses are out there. So they're very easy.

**[00:06:02] BB:** They're just all over the place.

**[00:06:03] BF:** Yes. So I'd say about half of it turns into PR pitches, and then a smaller fraction of that are ones that actually fall into remotely something that I would cover. I get a lot of weird bizarre things that I just do not cover. Clearly, some PR person just spammed every email address.

**[00:06:28] BB:** Oh, yes. Spray and pray.

**[00:06:30] BF:** Yes.

**[00:06:31] BB:** What do you do with those? Just quick delete just even from the subject line or

—

**[00:06:35] BF:** Yes. I mean, I open everything.

**[00:06:37] BB:** Oh, you're an open-everything person.

**[00:06:39] BF:** Yes. I mean, you never know. You don't ever know. You never know. I mean, sometimes, if it's a badly written subject line, even the first couple paragraphs of a pitch I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt, which is why I spent probably the first three or four hours of my day today just deleting stuff.

**[00:06:57] BB:** Wait, wait. Three to four hours.

**[00:07:00] BF:** Well, you know. As I'm going through those 190 emails, more is coming in because you have that dump in the morning too. Usually, I walk into a ton of email early because I get a lot of email from Israel and from Europe, and that's already there. So, yes, it's a lot.

**[00:07:19] BB:** That is a question I should be asking now on here, which we haven't really unpacked, which is just your estimate of time a day that is just the sifting through pitches, which is why we've built OnePitch to begin with. So you don't get bad pitches. You get the actual precise pitches. But anyway, oh.

**[00:07:37] BF:** Yes. It's at least a couple hours. I don't respond to the vast majority of it because, well, it's either spam or it's – when I'm talking about emails in general, like it's a tiny like single digit that I respond to. I mean a lot of the pitches. If a pitch isn't something that I'm remotely interested in or what I cover, I mean, it might be something super interesting. But if it's not something that I cover, then it's getting chucked anyway.

I also tend to sort things into – I have a huge filing system of folders in Outlook where I will save stuff for later. Like if somebody's pitching me about ransomware in schools. I'm not writing about that right now, but it doesn't mean it's a bad pitch and that I wouldn't want to talk to that person in a few weeks when a monster-size school district gets ransom. So I am a hoarder when it comes to email, but I'm a very organized hoarder.

**[00:08:31] BB:** Wow. I would say you are. So then do you use your inbox as your own personal Google search file?

**[00:08:37] BF:** It's certainly helpful. I mean, I can search through all these subfolders and find what I'm looking for. Then I have different folders for – like I just got back from the Black Hat and Defcon conferences in Vegas. I had hundreds of pitches to meet with people there. I love meeting with people. In theory, all of these people should be potentially someone that I would be interested in talking to. But time is limited, so you have to **[inaudible 00:09:05]** them and like put them in a folder.

**[00:09:08] BB:** So let's talk about that. So when you then have hundreds of emails to meet up with you because people know you're at this event, then how do you figure out who is the – how do you discern?

**[00:09:19] BF:** Well, I mean, people fall into a couple buckets. There are people that I see every year because I have a relationship with them.

**[00:09:28] BB:** So those are your people.

**[00:09:29] BF:** I may just like them. Like I enjoy – I save a lunch spot for them because they're just my friends, honestly. But they're good sources, and they usually have research and things like that that I want to talk to them about. So they get priority, even though it may not translate directly into a story.

Then there's the other people that they're pitching something that I know I'm writing about. Like this year was all about artificial intelligence. So anybody – like I created a separate folder of pitches that were just people that mentioned AI or looked like good AI people. There are things that look kind of interesting or different, and maybe it's somebody in politics or something that the average consumer would know. I put that into a separate folder. Then there's just the, “No, no, no. Not going to happen,” folder, people that I either know. I do have a very, very short list of PR people that I have blacklisted.

**[00:10:29] BB:** Oh, okay. So where's that list?

**[00:10:31] BF:** There's only two.

**[00:10:32] BB:** There's only two.

**[00:10:34] BF:** There's only two, and it takes a lot for them to end up on the blacklist. Yes. Those are probably **[inaudible 00:10:40]** without naming names.

**[00:10:43] BB:** I was just going to say who – okay, we're not going to name names. But what warranted them to get on that very short list? Thank God. But what happened?

[BREAK]

**[00:10:56] ANNOUNCER:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to learn about the unique ways OnePitch helps brands

engage with the right journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) and create your own custom media list in five minutes or less. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

**[00:11:19] BF:** There was some sexual harassment involved. Both of these are men. I should point out. Yes. They're men. One was, yes, made me feel very uncomfortable. He also was kind of derogatory. When I went from – I had worked at the Associated Press for years and covered cybersecurity at the end. The AP is a wonderful organization, top for news and credibility, and has a monster reach. But as we used to say, you can't spell cheap without AP, and it just did not do well. I am married with **[inaudible 00:11:54]**. I know.

There comes a time a lot of people leave, and they become PR people. Or they go to other news organizations because we have bills to pay. So I went to Consumer Reports which while respectable doesn't have the same kind of reach and isn't as high profile as where I was working. But they also gave me a 50% pay raise, and I have never been treated better in a job as far as management and just being treated as a human being with kids and like work-life balance and all that kind of stuff. That was why I left.

He asked me out loud, this PR person, at a party. He said, "Well, you must have been fired if you left the AP. Tell me what really happened." I'm like, "You know what really happened? I had two kids, and they need their own rooms. We were living in this time in New York City." It's like he was just so awful and obnoxious, and he just gave me like very – well, you know how it is when a guy is kind of looking at you, and he's not –

**[00:13:05] BB:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We have a list too here at BAM.

**[00:13:08] BF:** Yes.

**[00:13:09] BB:** Isn't that something, by the way? I think all women have a list.

**[00:13:14] BF:** It was worse when I was a sports writer.

**[00:13:17] BB:** Oh, I would imagine. Wow.

**[00:13:19] BF:** I know that much. I mean, tech is so male-dominated and oriented. It's really disgusting. When I go to these conferences – I mean, cybersecurity has definitely gotten, made an effort to get more women involved and hire women and things like that. But there is still no line for the ladies room at those events, and it is very misogynistic in a lot of ways. So that was one guy. The other guy –

**[00:13:45] BB:** Yes, the other person on the list.

**[00:13:47] BF:** The other person, perfectly nice, definitely not obnoxious. But he was so desperate for clients that he – I was walking around Defcon, and I was talking to a friend of mine that I hadn't seen in a year. He was showing me his little demonstration of how you could hack like a power plant kind of thing. It was this cute little dollhouse thing with blinky lights and whatever. It was very visual. He comes up to me. He's like, "Oh, I have someone I need you to meet. Can you come say hi, just whatever? I know you didn't have time to interview them. But can you just say hello?"

I was not happy about that, but I was like, "Fine, fine. If it'll make you go away." I mean, this is someone who would bombard me with emails. None of his clients were that high profile at the time. So I'm like, "Okay, fine." So I say goodbye to my friend. He like physically drags me into the next room, and then this gets worse. He ambushes his client who –

**[00:14:45] BB:** No.

**[00:14:46] BF:** Turns out to be – I mean, he's gone on to be very high profile in cybersecurity. Like he's this brilliant who does industrial control systems, meaning he does protection for cities, power plants, all that critical infrastructure that is super important now. He looks – so the PR guy introduces me to him. The guy is trying to like plug in things and set up his booth and whatever. He's busy and looks at me like I'm some desperate little girl who wants to talk to him and I'm – then he offers me. He's like, "I really don't have time for this right now. Would you like some **[inaudible 00:15:22]**?" He gives me a coloring book for my kids. I'm like, "This was not my idea," and I was so embarrassed.



**[00:15:31] BB:** Oh, my God.

**[00:15:33] BF:** Like I said, this guy has gone on to become a very big deal, and I hope to God he does not remember me because –

**[00:15:39] BB:** That's fine.

**[00:15:40] BF:** But he does not have that guy as his publicist anymore. I mean, because he was – this guy does little like startup things. Startups, if they're good, go on.

**[00:15:49] BB:** Yes. They grow up.

**[00:15:51] BF:** They grow up, and they find new publicists, usually.

**[00:15:54] BB:** Wow, wow, wow. That's the list of two.

**[00:15:58] BF:** I don't answer his emails. I don't whatever. I was at a party.

**[00:16:01] BB:** Wait. He still emails you?

**[00:16:03] BF:** He emails all – I did not tell him. He was –

**[00:16:05] BB:** No.

**[00:16:06] BF:** So he doesn't know. I just don't respond to any of his emails. He DMs me on Twitter, and he desperate, whatever, like just begging me to meet. Then this all happened last – I mean, this happened a few years ago. Then last year, I ignored him. This year, he started it up again and then saw me in the hallway. He's like, "Oh, Bree. I need to talk to you," blah, blah. I just put my hand up, and I said, "No. I do not have time for this," and I like ran.

**[00:16:37] BB:** Good for you.

**[00:16:39] BF:** I ran into him at a party too. I mean, he, again, tried to chase me down, and I had to leave the party. I was just like, "I'm not dealing with this guy."

**[00:16:47] BB:** My God.

**[00:16:49] BF:** I know. So the soap opera continues.

**[00:16:52] BB:** It does. Wow. These are the two juiciest people on – I got to ask this list question now moving forward, Bree. This is so good. It is astounding how people don't have social grace. They don't know. I'm sorry this has happened to you. But honestly, I was on a coffee walk with a girlfriend today, and we were talking about a mutual contact, and we were just astounded is the word I'm going to use how someone – anyway, I just like to consider those people not well, and they haven't been house-trained, and they just don't know. They just don't know. That's it.

Well, Bree, moving on, although this is fascinating stuff. Do you ever want exclusives or embargoes?

**[00:17:32] BF:** Embargoes I love, as long as they're not too far out because it gives me time to get things together. If I'm super busy, it lets me kind of plan out my week. Embargoes that are super short are not helpful. I've had embargoes that were like the FTC loves to drop embargoed stuff with less than an hour of notice, less than an hour. It's kind of like, okay, I don't even know if we can pull it together that fast. I'm certainly not going to break the embargo. Yes.

I mean, exclusives I don't see the value in so, unless it's like something that is so, so in my wheelhouse, and it's really hard to tell. I mean, I deal with a lot of cybersecurity research and it's – I can't commit to writing about things necessarily. When you take an exclusive, you're kind of committing to do things understandably because you've got to get it to somebody. But, yes, embargoes of a few days generally with research reports because it takes a while to read and digest.

Sometimes, in cybersecurity, we're talking like 15, 20, 30-page very technical **[inaudible]**  
**00:18:38]** that I can understand. I understand that stuff, but my job is translating that into things

that like my mom can understand. That takes some time. Executive series are great, though, too, so.

**[00:18:52] BB:** Okay. Bree, I have a little rapid-fire section that I'd love to go through, and let's see what we get. First, video or phone interviews.

**[00:19:03] BF:** I feel like COVID ruined a lot of things, and phone interviews was one of them. Like what used to be a phone call now has to be a video call. Until recently, I was living in a tiny apartment where there are children running around. I have not cleaned up. In the morning, I may not have like taken a shower and put on makeup and whenever. It turns when you have a Zoom interview, I feel like I'm a horrible person for turning my camera off.

**[00:19:28] BB:** No. We embrace that.

**[00:19:30] BF:** I have to blow my hair out for what used to be a phone call. Men don't realize that, so I –

**[00:19:38] BB:** I don't need to blow my hair out for –

**[00:19:41] BF:** You know, it's not fair.

**[00:19:43] BB:** Exactly.

**[00:19:44] BF:** I do a ton of media myself. Like I do a lot of talking head stuff for TV and radio, and I –

**[00:19:50] BB:** Yes. You know when you got to do it. That's a blowout.

**[00:19:53] BF:** Yes. I have to blow my hair out for some little tiny TV station in the middle of nowhere. But if I don't look good, someone is going to see it online and make fun of me.

**[00:20:03] BB:** Oh, Go.

**[00:20:04] BF:** So, yes.

**[00:20:06] BB:** That's good. Okay, next question. Although we could be here for hours I'm sure, Bree. But the inbox you'll need to get to. So anyway, bullet points or paragraphs in pitches?

**[00:20:15] BF:** Use your best judgment. If it works, go with it. Just keep it short, and nothing should be longer than a page. I feel like that's in PR school 101. Apart with email because – and journalists do this too. They go on forever because it's not like they have to put it into a physical newspaper anymore. But, yes, the shorter, the better.

**[00:20:36] BB:** Okay. The shorter, the better. Okay. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

**[00:20:41] BF:** That's another best judgment thing. If it's like one or two images, that's fine. Most people's Outlook or Gmail or whatever can handle that. If it's like courtesy photos to go with the story and video and whatever, you're probably going to want to put it in a Dropbox or something like that, just for your own sanity.

**[00:21:02] BB:** Yes. Okay. Email or XDM or Twitter DM or whatever the hell we're calling it now?

**[00:21:08] BF:** Email unless you personally know me kind of thing. I mean, I feel – also, Twitter. Like I still look at it, but I don't look at it like I used to look at it.

**[00:21:19] BB:** Yes, exactly.

**[00:21:22] BF:** Like looking at it objectively, I don't know how efficient that is for PR people. Unless you don't have an email contact, then that might be a way to go.

**[00:21:30] BB:** Yes, maybe. Okay. One follow-up or multiple?

**[00:21:33] BF:** If you know me and you think that this actually is something that I would be interested in. I mean, if you don't – I've gotten spammers, like these PR people that are pitching

things that I have never written about like a lot of weed stuff and like what – you know, like just – well, I mean, marijuana is legal.

**[00:21:56] BB:** Yes, I know. Okay. But how is this tied to cyber?

**[00:21:59] BF:** It isn't. That's the thing. I mean, it's like accessories or like snacks or like holistic remedies. Like these are just that – they'll send me like eight, nine emails like, "Bringing this up to the top of your inbox." I hate those words, "Gently bringing this up to the top of your inbox." Rarely are there because I flag things in the morning when I go through like the 80 emails that are there. I go through and I mark things for follow-up. It's like people – even if it's cybersecurity-related, do not email me a half dozen times for –

That's another pet peeve. I'll write a story about something. Then the next day, like they'll see it and be like, "Hey, my client should write about – would be great for a story about this too." It's like, "Okay. Well, that's nice. But I wrote about this, and I'm done." Maybe there's a follow-up, but don't email me multiple times about old news.

**[00:22:58] BB:** No. We don't want that. Okay, Bree, I got to get to another call. I'm sure you do too. So we're just going to wrap it up. But as the last thing on my little short list here, press release or media kit?

**[00:23:10] BF:** It depends on what you're pitching. If it's a product with lots of images and video and things like that, you probably want to do a media kit. But if it's just an executive announcement or something like that, just a short press release is probably the way to go. Don't overdo it. It's a lot of work on your part that you don't need to do.

**[00:23:29] BB:** Good to know. Bree, is there anything you want to promote, highlight, celebrate, et cetera, besides read your articles and follow you on Twitter or whatever it's called?

**[00:23:39] BF:** I am on Twitter and Instagram, and I signed up for some of the other ones. But it hasn't really worked out yet; Threads, Mastodon, **[inaudible 00:23:47]**.

**[00:23:48] BB:** Oh, that's going to die in about a year.

**[00:23:50] BF:** Yes. I mean, who knows? Yes. People need whatever. I'm here, and I am friendly, and I do not mind pitches at all. But, yes, I don't get back with everyone. I'm sorry.

**[00:24:03] BB:** That is okay, Bree, because you have hours a day you're looking at the pitches, my God. Bree, thank you so much for being here.

**[00:24:12] BF:** Sure. Happy to be here.

**[00:24:14] BB:** For every publicist out there, she's running the marathon, so get on your running shoes if you want to catch her sometime. I think that's the best takeaway right there.

**[00:24:22] BF:** Yes, definitely taking tech-related running pitches for the next couple months.

**[00:24:26] BB:** There you go. Oh, there you go. Thank you so much, Bree. Pleasure having you here. We'll talk to you soon.

**[00:24:33] BF:** All right, talk soon.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:24:35] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Bree Fowler from CNET. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at [onepitch.co/podcast](https://onepitch.co/podcast). We'll see you next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]