

EPISODE 187

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] Announcer: Welcome to another episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. Are you looking for an easier way to reach the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to sign up for a free account today.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Steffi Cao from Forbes. As a staff writer, Steffi covers the creator economy and internet culture. During the episode, Steffi talks about her focus on the creator economy beat. What good pitches look like to her? Why she rarely writes about pitches from PR agencies? And more. Let's dive in.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:57] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We have with us today the very first creator economy reporter, the staff writer over at Forbes, Steffi Cao. She is based in New York and previously was at BuzzFeed. And she's living her New York life.

Steffi, thank you for being here.

[0:01:18] SC: Thank you so much for having me, Beck.

[0:01:19] BB: Yes. And you came prepared, I heard, Steffi. You have like your pitches you liked. You had ones you don't like. We're not going to name names. But we're ready to roll.

[0:01:29] SC: We're ready to roll. I've got my matcha and I've got my emails. Let's do it.

[0:01:31] BB: Great. Wonderful. Wonderful. Okay. First, I've had tons of people here who say like, "Hey, here's what my outlet's about." But I think we know a lot about Forbes. But how would you describe what creator economy encompasses, especially since you're the first person there to hold that title or that full beat.

[0:01:51] SC: Yeah, absolutely. It's definitely an honor. I'm very excited to see where this desk goes. But I'm very excited for this desk. At least at Forbes, it will be really focused on who is making money online and what interesting things are happening across the internet that are building out business for young people across the world or not young people as well.

I'm very, very excited to dig into interesting things happening in the tech world. But ultimately it comes down to influencers and people who are getting big on these tech platforms and the interesting ventures they're taking on. Yeah, that's what I envisioned for this.

[0:02:29] BB: Yeah. And expand a little bit further. You said people making money online. Like what?

[0:02:34] SC: I'm really interested, for instance, in Twitch streamers. I know we talk about YouTubers, TikTokers. But I'd also love to dig into the fun things with like VTubing, these hologram gamers and people who are getting really big on Douyin on the Chinese and things. I'm very, very fascinated by the trends that are moving from Douyin over to TikTok and how those things are translating. And the people who are branching off from YouTube to do coffee companies, and beverage companies, and clothing lines, and tours and podcasts. All these different things.

And the way that the creator economy has progressed so much over the past few years, there's definitely so many interesting stories to dig into.

[0:03:16] BB: God. I wonder, too, how big that is from a macro-economic type of thing. You might actually know that. Does the federal government now track this in terms of taxes and size? It's diddly squat, I'm sure, compared to other big things like health care workers. But is there something like even more macro-y that's now being tracked?

[0:03:38] SC: I actually don't know.

[0:03:42] BB: Yeah. I was like, "I don't think so."

[0:03:44] SC: I mean, that would be an interesting story.

[0:03:45] BB: It would be. Now I got to look. Yeah.

[0:03:48] SC: It's definitely a very unregulated industry because it is so new and expanding so fast. And most of it is pretty much based on like how a talent industry would work. Different from modeling or from acting, that sort of thing. It is largely freelance contract, which means there's a lot of room for both interesting deals and very interesting ways people are going about managing their business.

[0:04:12] BB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Okay. Now given that wide swath that you cover, how's your inbox?

[0:04:18] SC: My inbox is constantly busy. I try to maintain like a zero inbox, but it is so hard. I do love a pitch though, that being said. I'm always happy to see an email pop up.

[0:04:33] BB: Okay. Okay. You're always happy to see an email pop up. Do you read every email? Or what do we do there?

[0:04:41] SC: I try to. I think in the slow seasons when maybe like the news day is not that crazy, I try to read every email. But when things are getting crazy and I'm on deadlines, then it tends to slip through the cracks.

[0:04:54] BB: Yes. Okay. Do you have a system in which you do things? Like you keep your sanity together? Or how do you avoid the cracks?

[0:05:02] SC: Oh, my goodness. It's definitely a lot of Google calendars, and Outlook and all those different sort of time mechanisms even to just like take a half hour in the morning to go through my inbox and make sure I haven't missed anything. Because, also, it's crossing wires with sources and internal emails. It's a bit of a mess. But I try and stay organized just by like setting time aside to do things. But most of it, for emails, is definitely PR.

[0:05:32] BB: Got it. Okay. Definitely, PR. And that leads us then to, well, what is a good pitch versus not a good pitch for you?

[0:05:41] **SC:** Yeah. I think I definitely –

[0:05:43] **BB:** I know you came prepared, too, Steffi.

[0:05:45] **SC:** I did come prepared. I think a good pitch for me is something that like gets me right away is a headline that I just think is funny.

[0:05:53] **BB:** Really?

[0:05:52] **SC:** I was like used to Gremlin. You know what I mean?

[0:05:56] **BB:** Yeah. You're an internet coverage person. Yeah.

[0:06:00] **SC:** Exactly. My brain is entirely made of worms. And so, if like something is just like a silly headline. I don't know. I feel like –

[0:06:08] **BB:** Now you're saying headline. But do you mean subject line?

[0:06:11] **SC:** Subject line.

[0:06:11] **BB:** Yeah. Okay. Subject line. Just to clarify for everybody. Yeah.

[0:06:15] **SC:** Again, brain worms.

[0:06:17] **BB:** No problem.

[0:06:18] **SC:** Yeah. I think like just something that's like kind of silly. I got one about AI being like a dating coach and how people are like I think filling out their profiles with AI now. I think that's just so silly and fun. I'll definitely click. It's definitely something that I'm interested in. I've done a lot of dating coverage in the past when I was at BuzzFeed News about sort of this tech cultural AI coverage and the modern dating world, stuff I haven't done a lot of coverage. Yeah, I

think the first thing is probably – realistically, it's probably just like whatever gets me to click as like a human being on the internet, which is kind of silly.

[0:06:56] BB: I mean, that's a unique, distinct spin on make or click I'd say. Make her click into the email. Do you have an example?

[0:07:07] SC: I do.

[0:07:08] BB: Let's hear it.

[0:07:10] SC: I got an email recently that was small creators drive \$\$ money from Amazon affiliates. It's definitely like –

[0:07:21] BB: Small cr – okay. Okay. Aha.

[0:07:22] SC: Small creators drive dollars from Amazon affiliates. And I think what drew me to this was just, first of all, just visually, it's got like something a little bit different in there because it's just got the symbol. Basically, I was like, "Oh, what's this?"

But it's also I think interesting in that it's concise and what the pitch is for. What the services and what the PR trying to connect me to, that is exactly what my coverage is, is how are creators making money online? And how is that landscape changing?

This one's not necessarily like the funny one. The AI dating thing was like low-key funny. And one of them I remember actually just like straight up responded to a tweet of mine. I think I was like tweeting like, "Oh, should I change my Slack profile to Gibby? And someone emailed me and was like, "Please change your Slack profile to Gibby." I was like, "Okay. Instant click."

But I think for something like this, from like a more professional standpoint, it's definitely like this is the kind of subject that I'm definitely interested in. And like maybe this company can connect me to someone who is driving money from Amazon affiliates and how small micro-influencers are doing that.

[0:08:32] BB: And let me ask too and clarify this. Because, of course, now my wheels are turning a bit more on this. Is it necessarily a "creator"? Or could it be like, "Yeah, mom with three kids. Hey, I'm trying to get some extra meals on the table and I make 200 bucks doing this random thing on the internet." I don't know. Does that categorize for you a creator?

[0:08:51] SC: I think a creator is someone who is able to support themselves through media.

[0:08:58] BB: Through. Got it. Got it. Got it. Okay. Ooh. Good definition. That's very good.

[0:09:02] SC: It's very contentious to see like where the line is drawn for creator. Because there are definitely a lot of creators who are part-time and doing other jobs while this is a huge part of their platform. However, for the purposes of my reporting, for like a reader, there needs to be some kind of threshold for why they think the story is important.

Yeah, it's definitely something that I feel like that's at least my working definition. But it's not like hard and fast rule. Because depending on the story, it could differ. But that's generally what I go off of.

[0:09:34] BB: Gotcha. Okay. Ooh, I like the definition of that. Okay.

[BREAK]

[0:09:40] 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 and create your own custom media list in five minutes or less. Now back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:10:04] BB: Now you gave us a good one. You have an alternative or other things you don't like in subject lines? Let's talk.

[0:10:11] SC: I do. I do. I don't like when PR people pitch me a story. That's my one big pet peeve I will just instantly not like.

[0:10:21] BB: Hey, what do you mean though? Pick you a story? That's the whole point, right? Do elaborate. Do elaborate.

[0:10:28] SC: Okay. This is my relationship with PR. I feel like when I get emails, I think I'm looking for a lead. Because story-wise, I know what stories I want to write.

[0:10:38] BB: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[0:10:38] SC: **[inaudible 0:10:38]** stories from my editor. And so, I think it can – at least to me, the way I was trained as a journalist is like any story that should come from a journalistic standpoint rather than like working with an agency or a company who offers the story idea. Not to say that I don't think people in PR don't have good story ideas. I think they do. But just professionally, I think it's like I need to keep – I know what stories I want to write.

And so, when I'm looking at emails, I'm looking for something that will give me a source, some data. Someone that connect me to someone in the creator economy. Those are the things I'm looking for rather than the straight-up story itself. Because for me, it's like I already know what I need to do. When the subject line is, "Here's the story idea," that's an instant pet peeve for me, I will say.

[0:11:24] BB: Got it. Interesting. You don't want a played-up story. You want, oh, an expert. Some data. Some things that could then tie into a narrative, a story, or maybe even something you're exploring.

[0:11:38] SC: Absolutely. Y eah. I already know usually what stories I want to work on. And so, when I'm looking through – the ones I'm going to click on first are things that are like new study shows X about Instagram lifestyle influencers or something like that. That's something that is like immediately I know will be useful to me in my reporting.

[0:11:57] BB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Okay. This is very good. What else bugs you?

[0:12:02] **SC:** What else bugs me? I will say I will say much else bugs me. I don't love Gmail thing just because there's so many fishing emails out there. You have to be a little bit **[inaudible 0:12:11]**.

[0:12:11] **BB:** Oh, no.

[0:12:13] **SC:** So many journalists are getting docs. It's like a big safety thing for fashion. I don't love from like a Gmail kind of thing. But I –

[0:12:21] **BB:** Wait a second though. You mean people are sending you a Gmail email? Like, "Hey, I do PR. But here's my Gmail account."

[0:12:29] **SC:** Yep, I do get that.

[0:12:30] **BB:** What? What?

[0:12:32] **SC:** It is a lot. It is a lot.

[0:12:33] **BB:** Really? Is this because they don't have like their own account? Like, what? This sounds like who would do this? This sounds unprofessional to me.

[0:12:43] **SC:** I know. I don't know. It's happened a couple times and I just – each time, it's, "What is going on?" This makes me feel ill at ease.

[0:12:51] **BB:** Yes. Yes.

[0:12:53] **SC:** Yeah. I don't think a lot of emails bugs me because the delete button's right there if it comes down to it. I definitely appreciate people that follow up when it comes to like, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know this influencer is working on this thing. We want to keep you updated." Because, definitely, those things can like get swept under the rug. And then if I'm working on a story that I see then this creator fits really well, especially for people who are

repping talent, especially, I always appreciate a follow-up of like, "Just making sure you saw this." Because I do want to see it. I do want to see all the things.

[0:13:25] BB: Okay. You do want to see. Okay. Very good. Ooh. Do you ever like exclusives or embargoes?

[0:13:32] SC: Ooh. Exclusive for interesting. I do like an exclusive. I did a great one a while ago with Joaquin Oliver's father from Parkland. He did a great art exhibition where he lined up a fleet of buses. And that was a really impactful story.

I got to talk to Manuel, who was just great about sharing what he'd been through, in gun violence in schools and the things he was working on to sort of like stand up to the government and get his message across. That was an embargo with us when I was at BuzzFeed. And that was just a great, great story.

Usually, I will pass on – I'll confirm an embargo just so I can hear the news. But usually, if it ends up being something that I report on, I don't think it usually – I don't think I usually accept embargoes.

[0:14:22] BB: Okay. No for embargoes. Okay. But something juicy exclusive, yeah.

[0:14:28] SC: I think more so for people that rep talent, I will probably agree to an embargo for. I've definitely –

[0:14:35] BB: Okay. Talent. Talent. Talent. Talent. Yeah.

[0:14:38] SC: Yeah. Because, ultimately, my beat is about people. It's about not necessarily the platforms. What differentiates a creator economy reporter from necessarily like a tech reporter is really that tech is focused on platforms and the development of technology overall. And the creator economy is about people that are making money off of these platforms and the sort of like cultural aspect. So, lifestyle influencers, gaming, all these sorts of things that like people consume created by people.

[0:15:08] BB: By the way, what would you actually classify as a talent?

[0:15:12] SC: Talent? Someone who is an influencer who is a celebrity.

[0:15:18] BB: Okay. How do we qualify that? Because I could see some publicist being like, "Do you want to talk to my celebrity person influencer? They have 10,000 followers." And you're like, "What?"

[0:15:28] SC: I definitely think you cannot pitch yourself as talent.

[0:15:33] BB: Yeah. Okay. You cannot – that's the first sign. If you're pitching at yourself, you are not talent. Oh, that's funny. That's true though. God.

[0:15:46] SC: That's my biggest fear, is that after I do this I'll get 10,000 emails and be like, "I'm an influencer."

[0:15:53] BB: No. No. Go away.

[0:15:52] SC: And it's like 50 followers. That's what scares me the most.

[0:15:56] BB: Well, this is why we're doing this so that you clarify. Listen, you have to have a representation. Number one. Okay. Number two, you make your whole living off of being an influencer. I would say that's number two given your previous definition. Yeah.

[0:16:12] SC: Absolutely. Yeah, I think those are the things, at least, regarding PR is what I'm looking for. Not to say that I will never interview someone who does not make their entire living off of just social media. Or I will never talk to someone who has under 10,000 followers. I've done it before and I will likely do it again. But I think those are the kinds of stories where I want to go out and find those sources.

But in terms of this conversation for emails, it's definitely – those are probably my thresholds for emails in my inbox.

[0:16:44] BB: Okay. Okay. This is good. This is good.

[0:16:46] SC: I feel like I'm going to really curate my inbox now.

[0:16:49] BB: This is good. This is good. Okay. Steffi, for those who want to build a relationship with you, how do they go about that?

[0:16:57] SC: I definitely always appreciate someone reaching out to me if they've read my work before and they want to meet up for a coffee and tell me about what is it they represent and what kind of content they can see their products or clients fitting in with me. I definitely appreciate a little face-to-face chat.

The human connection can really go so far. So, at least you're not like another person in my inbox, but someone who I can go to as like, "Oh, they probably have some data on this." And so, I can always contact them if I need that.

Yeah, I think I always appreciate – I know when I started at Forbes, I got a lot of emails from press people who I've known through other journalists reaching out saying, "Congratulations. Would you like to grab a coffee?" Which is always –

[0:17:44] BB: Yeah. There you go.

[0:17:44] SC: – I definitely appreciate it. Something like that I feel like is – just definitely appreciate it. I'm never opposed to like someone being like, "I really liked this coverage of yours. I think I could tell you more about what I have to offer here."

[0:17:59] BB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Okay. This is helpful. Okay, Steffi, we have a quick-fire Q&A portion. Are you ready?

[0:18:08] SC: I'm so ready.

[0:18:10] BB: Let's see what we get here. Video or phone interviews?

[0:18:13] **SC:** Video – in-person above anything.

[0:18:14] **BB:** In-person. Wow. I think that's the first answer for someone on that. Okay, in-person.

[0:18:20] **SC:** As much contact as possible.

[0:18:22] **BB:** By the way, where is the best place to take you to coffee in your opinion? Oh, do you have a top three? Like, Blue Bottle for me. Hands down.

[0:18:32] **SC:** Oh, Blue Bottle is great. That's a very West Coast answer.

[0:18:34] **BB:** Mm-hmm. I know. But it is of us. Okay. Go ahead.

[0:18:39] **SC:** At least New York Devoción.

[0:18:40] **BB:** Okay.

[0:18:41] **SC:** Yeah.

[0:18:42] **BB:** Okay. There you go. Now everyone knows where to take you. Now you'll know, by the way, Steffi if an ask comes in. You'll know it was from here. Okay, bullet points or paragraphs?

[0:18:53] **SC:** Oh, bullet points. I know my job is words. But sometimes there's too many words.

[0:18:58] **BB:** Yes. Short or long pitches? It probably answers that.

[0:19:02] **SC:** Short.

[0:19:03] **BB:** Yes. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[0:19:06] **SC:** Images attached.

[0:19:08] **BB:** Okay. One follow-up or multiple?

[0:19:11] **SC:** Ooh. One.

[0:19:13] **BB:** One. One and done.

[0:19:14] **SC:** The thing is there's so many that I feel like the less I need to click on, the better for me.

[0:19:18] **BB:** Yeah, the better. The better. Yeah. Email or Twitter DM?

[0:19:24] **SC:** Email. Oh, I get too many DMs.

[0:19:27] **BB:** Yeah. And then it's like another place. Everyone's always been emailed. Okay. Direct or creative subject lines? You said funny previously.

[0:19:35] **SC:** Yeah, I like a creative one. But it's not like I'm opposed to a direct. Because as we saw today, I do like a direct subject line.

[0:19:42] **BB:** Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

[0:19:43] **SC:** But as a person, I find the funny one's just very funny.

[0:19:46] **BB:** There you go. Press release or media kit?

[0:19:50] **SC:** Media kit? Actually, let me walk that one back. Press release.

[0:19:53] **BB:** Okay. Okay. And why is that?

[0:19:56] **SC:** The work I do isn't very focused on needing to download images. Press release [inaudible 0:20:00] for me.

[0:20:00] **BB:** Yeah, it's true. "Time you read pitches?"

[0:20:05] **SC:** 9am.

[0:20:06] **BB:** Is it a morning? 9am. Okay. Your 30 minutes?

[0:20:08] **SC:** Yes.

[0:20:08] **BB:** Okay. 9am. Sources you love?

[0:20:12] **SC:** Sources I love. I love an app founder. I love someone who's done a partnership. Big creators in a partnership with a brand. I love people who have had interesting experiences on, say, a Hinge or a Tinder. Yeah, I think that's it. I'm sure for Forbes, it's more business-y. Definitely more CEOs, founders, new creators. That type of thing.

[0:20:39] **BB:** Okay. Anything else, Steffi, that you want to promote, highlight, et cetera, about you? You obviously have an email that you send out, newsletter.

[0:20:49] **SC:** Yes, I do. I do have my own –

[0:20:51] **BB:** On Substack. Yeah.

[0:20:52] **SC:** Yes, my flagship newsletter, it's Steffi, which is great. I also do some PR work there for products. And just sort of pitches, generally, for people to talk to. Not too much, but a little bit. But, yeah, I think that's basically it. That's everything I want to promote.

[0:21:09] **BB:** Steffi, thank you for being here today. We know where to find you for coffee in New York. How exciting.

[0:21:16] **SC:** You heard it here first. I'm going to find you at Blue Bottle.

[0:21:19] **BB:** Yes, you will. And number one sign that you're not a talent is you're sending the email yourself.

[0:21:26] **SC:** Exactly.

[0:21:29] **BB:** Oh, that's great. Steffi, thank you so much. A lot of fun.

[0:21:32] **SC:** Thank you so much for having me, Beck.

[OUTRO]

[0:21:35] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for joining us this week on another episode of Coffee With a Journalist featuring Steffi Cao from Forbes. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at 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]