

EPISODE 202

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by the team at OnePitch. Are you looking for a more efficient way to find and pitch the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our Guest on today's episode is Thomas Germain from Gizmodo. As a senior technology reporter, Thomas covers issues related to privacy, AI, misinformation, digital rights, and life on the Internet. During the episode, Thomas talks about his desire to write about sandwiched technology, the kinds of pitches he is and is not looking for, why he prefers to speak with sources over the phone, and more. Let's dive in.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:53] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, and we're here to demystify the publicist and reporter relationship. That is what we're trying to solve here and just to make better friends with our media editors, deputy editors, freelancers, et cetera, just all the journalists that are out there and publicists. Here we are. Today with us, oh, coming in with some very specific nerd tech here, this is exciting, Thomas, is Thomas Germain. He's a senior technology reporter at Gizmodo. Welcome, Thomas.

[00:01:28] TG: Thanks for having me on.

[00:01:29] BB: Thomas, for those who are maybe not as familiar – by the way, sometimes, I forget to ask this. I just forgot to ask it with Modern Retail with Melissa, but that's okay. For Gizmodo, how would you describe the coverage and then specifically yours? We, obviously, know the future is here is the tagline, which I love, but tell us more.

[00:01:47] TG: Sure. Gizmodo is a really old technology site in terms of the history of blogging. We used to be part of the Gawker Empire if people remember that. **[inaudible 00:01:58]**. There's a lot of different tech blogs. I think the thing that makes Gizmodo stand out is it's kind of

snarky a lot of the time. Also, there's a little bit more culture reporting. We tend to focus on areas and subjects, like you said, that can be a little nerdier, but also just things that other publications are skipping because we're sometimes doing stuff just because it's interesting as opposed to like because it's the most important story in the world. We'll pick up things that other people leave behind.

My beat specifically, we're a pretty small, so I'm a little bit all over the place. I like to summarize it as I write about how big tech companies are screwing consumers over and what they can do about it. To drill down a little bit more, I've been writing about digital privacy for going on 10 years now, doing a lot of writing about AI. Also, I'm really interested in – I think we're at this moment where the Internet is changing in these really radical ways because the business model of advertising is changing because of privacy moves that Apple and Google are making and just broader shifts with how platforms work and what kinds of videos people are watching and where the information comes from. I'm really interested in how that's changing culture and the experience of interacting with each other, with companies, and just finding weird things online to enjoy and spend your time on.

[00:03:19] BB: Weird things online to enjoy. I like that. Add that comma in. How's your inbox?

[00:03:26] TG: It's better than it's been in a while. I've spent some time unsubscribing to things and blocking people. I just checked. Yesterday, I got about 150 emails, which is not great in terms of focus. I'm often missing things, but it's certainly been worse.

[00:03:46] BB: Of those 150, were those all pitches? I'm thinking not but you tell us.

[00:03:50] TG: Well, I – most of them are pitches. I've got some – I got a bunch of Google Alerts set up. I got one here for sandwich technology. If anyone has a pitch about sandwiches, I love writing about sandwiches.

[00:04:01] BB: Sandwiches. Literal sandwiches or is this a tech word like dogfooding or whatever?

[00:04:05] TG: No, no. Just actual sandwiches. That's one of my – there's a bunch of things sort of like that where I just am like scouring the web because I think people might click on a story about sandwiches. Is there a tech angle here? Yes, it's a lot of pitches. There's a lot of pitches in here.

[00:04:24] BB: Okay. Then how do you sort the ones you're interested in, if at all, from the ones that are a clear pass?

[00:04:32] TG: Sure. I mean, I really try to at least read the subject line of every single email that I get, which I know like some reporters, they really don't want to get pitches. I'm okay with it. I'm not necessarily I don't want to hear a pitch from everyone. It's got to be about the stuff I write about. But I'm always looking. I occasionally will write something based on a pitch that I get, so always looking for stories. I'm opening the emails, if nothing else.

[00:05:00] BB: Okay. Oh, so wait a second. You're opening every email?

[00:05:03] TG: Not every email, but I try to. If I've got a day that where not a lot is going on, I will actually go in and try and look at every single email because you never know. Some of them, I can tell from the subject line that it's not going to be for me, and I just send to the trash, but I try.

[00:05:18] BB: This is good. All right. In a subject line that you like, how is it formatted? Or what are the contents?

[00:05:26] TG: Sure. It could be a couple different things. The main thing is I really want to understand what you're telling me about without opening the email. I wrote a story that was about how – which sounds obvious. Apparently, it's not based on the emails I'm getting every day. I wrote a story that was about a study that looked at the companies that were selling data, personal information about members of the military, data brokers. The subject line was, “Embargoed: data broker, plus military data.”

Now, that's a little specific. I know what a data broker is. I write about that. But that's like dead simple. I know exactly what's going to be in there. Open that one, for sure. A lot of the emails

that I open have the word embargo at the beginning of them, which I don't want people to abuse because if it turns out it's not something I'm interested in, if it's an unuseful embargo, that's not going to help. I think it often – that can be a sign that this is something new, so that's nice.

[00:06:27] BB: Often-ish.

[00:06:29] TG: The one thing I'd say about it is if I'm going to cover a story in general, it has to be something that you can sum the whole thing up in a single sentence, right? The kind of reporting that I'm doing is really headline-focused. It's digital media. This isn't The New Yorker. People aren't just going to read it because it's on the website. If you can't summarize your idea in an email subject line, that's going to be a huge problem. It's not a hard and fast rule. Some stories are worth it, but you got to know that it's worth it.

[00:07:00] BB: Good to know. Looking at some of your past stuff, Thomas, it is a wide array, as we've covered. You're talking about deepfakes on one thing. You're talking about TikTok on the auto scroll. You have a Chrome feature and so forth. How do you discern what you're going to write about? Or is it somewhat governed by what your editor is maybe saying or a pitch that sparks your interest?

[00:07:24] TG: In general, it's really up to me. Obviously, my editors are approving everything, but I generally get a lot of leeway. There's a couple thing. It's all going to be so vague, but I want people to be affected by it. I'm not a business reporter. If you're sending me something about your series B funding, you're going straight to the trash. I might block you altogether. I want human beings out on the Internet to feel something happening.

In general, I like to write about big platforms because everyone interacts with them, and it's something that's relatable. I'm really going for a popular audience. Sometimes, I can get really wonky. I'll write about something in adtech, advertising technology. In general, I want everyone to care about it, so it's got to be widely applicable. A lot of people have to be affected.

[00:08:13] BB: How about sources? Are you looking for particular experts all the time? Or what would you say?

[00:08:20] TG: I get a lot of pitches that are source available, blah, blah, blah. We're trying to promote a CEO as a thought leader or something. Usually, I ignore those. The ones that are helpful, often they'll be a quote, like a little snippet of a quote. In quotation marks in the subject line can be kind of interesting, if it's a quote that catches my eye.

I was looking through at some of these. I think action verbs help. There are some emails that I opened recently. I didn't end up writing about it, but it was like, "Such and such organization condemns the New York City government."

[00:08:55] BB: Oh, whoa.

[00:08:57] TG: Condemn is the fun word. Something is happening. That is not **[inaudible 00:09:01]**.

[00:09:01] BB: Yes, daytime.

[00:09:02] BB: Yes. I'm not as interested in sources. I've got a lot of sources. If you can get to it really fast, there's something in the news. You get to me before my story goes up, and I happen to be writing about it. I've dropped in quotes straight from emails, but you got to be working really fast. If it's yesterday's news or, let alone, three days ago, that is a waste of my time and your time sending me an email with a quote.

[00:09:26] BB: That's a waste of time. Okay. I hope everyone heard that. Okay, Thomas. Is there further – not further. We haven't really gotten into it, but like pet peeves that you have with pitches or publicists in general. We just want to get them on the table.

[00:09:39] TG: I think it's probably stuff that you've covered before, but there's – I can write a really clickbaity headline that's going to get people to open an article. If it's not, delivering on what I said the article's going to be about. I'm eroding trust with my audience, and maybe they're not going to come back. If you send me – for a while, I was getting pitches where they would put re: at the beginning of the email, as though this was a conversation that we'd already been having.

[00:10:04] BB: Oh, I hate that trick.

[00:10:06] TG: Those people got blocked. I don't like being manipulated. The chances that it's going to be worth it because I'm going to love your pitch, I think, are low. Then, obviously, if you're sending me an email about something that's not on my beat, and I get a lot of those emails from you, you're going to my spam folder.

[00:10:22] BB: Okay. This is good to know. Anything further? I don't want to tell you that that's all the time you have to talk on this topic.

[00:10:28] TG: No, no. **[inaudible 00:10:29]**.

[BREAK]

[00:10:33] 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 RESUMED]

[00:10:56] BB: What about the opposite like, “Oh, my gosh. I just can't – I just love when,” dot, dot, dot from a publicist? If you have one, let's be frank.

[00:11:04] TG: Yes. I'll be honest. I respect what publicists do. I think it's a thankless job. Most of the emails I get are kind of annoying and just wasting my time. That's the job. You're trying to get my attention. I really like it when you've clearly been reading my work, and you understand why this is a good story for me. I get emails where I think people hear that, and they go, “Okay, I need to put in – I need to mention that I read one of your stories recently, and then I'm going to tell you about something completely different that doesn't.” I don't care about that.

I got an email. The subject line of the email was the headline of one of my recent stories. I was like, “Oh, well. Maybe this is someone emailing me a correction. Maybe I got something wrong.

Maybe it's a company that was involved." It ended up being someone like, "I saw this story you wrote the other day. Loved it. Are you interested in talking to this AI company about something totally unrelated?"

[00:11:55] BB: I know exactly what you're talking about. They're like, "Oh, my gosh, Thomas. Hey, I read your article on the deepfakes with Biden. But, hey, I have this new AI launch that's happening this and doesn't have anything to do with it."

[00:12:04] TG: Yes. I don't care that you read my articles. It's not flattering. It's nice that people are reading it. I hope they do, but that's not going to make me like you more. I just don't care. If it has to do with my beat and I can tell from the email that you know that this is actually a good fit for me, I do really like that because I can tell that you put in the time and that maybe it's worth the effort.

Data brokers, plus military data, that's something that most reporters aren't going to care about but caught my eye immediately. They know that was for me. That was a really tailored pitch, worth the time, as opposed to just blasting 800 people from RocketReach.

[00:12:39] BB: It's not good. From RocketReach, no, people. No. Good God. God, God, God. Okay. Thomas, is there any chance of people making a good relationship with you?

[00:12:51] TG: Yes, absolutely.

[00:12:52] BB: Tell us more.

[00:12:53] TG: I have people reach out, and it's not for a particular story. It's not like, "I really want you to meet this great company that I'm working with." It's just like, "I would love to have a 10-minute phone call with you and just get to know what you're interested in. So I know if in the future something comes up, I can send it your way." I'm happy to have those conversations, and I've actually built relationships with publicists that I reach out to them like, "Do you have any clients that covered this topic?" Because I know that they get what I'm doing, and we can have a collaborative relationship.

I'm totally open to building those relationships. If you bring me a really good pitch, I'm going to read every email you send me going forward, unless you really blow it from there. But there's definitely publicists I know that I like that I'm even relying on.

[00:13:41] **BB**: Okay. I think that clearly covers it. To be clear, you're in New York.

[00:13:45] **TG**: I'm in New York. Yes.

[00:13:46] **BB**: Yes. Originally, school, LA, all the fun stuff there.

[00:13:49] **TG**: Yes. I grew up in LA. I came out here 2015. Yes, I'm a New Yorker now.

[00:13:54] **BB**: Never came back. Now, you're a New Yorker. By the way, I know there is a lot of controversy around are you a New Yorker if you're a transplant. But if it's over 5 years or 10 years or 20, what is the line of demarcation for it to you?

[00:14:10] **TG**: That's a great question. I think what really started the shift was when I go back to LA where I grew up, I feel like I'm visiting. When I come back to New York, it's like, "Okay."

[00:14:21] **BB**: Oh, yes. You feel like you're home.

[00:14:24] **TG**: I'm familiar with everything. I think at this point, I feel more connected to New York than LA, even though I spent most of my life in LA. It's been a while.

[00:14:32] **BB**: Yes. Oh, that is the sign. That is the sign.

[00:14:37] **TG**: I think we're there.

[00:14:38] **BB**: A visitor. Yes, yes, yes. Okay. Thomas, I would love to go through a quick list of rapid-fire questions, if you're willing to play. Here we go. Video or phone interview?

[00:14:50] **TG**: I prefer the phone. I think video doesn't add much, and it's just annoying. We got to make Zoom work. I'd much rather just get on the phone. Also, I'm sure publicists don't like. I

would much rather just talk one-on-one with the source than have another person sitting there spying on us. I get that you kind of want to – you're a little protective but better for me. It's more comfortable.

[00:15:10] BB: Yes. I'm telling you, the phone is clicking up on this question. We're coming back to the basics. I swear.

[00:15:16] TG: Always phone for me every time.

[00:15:17] BB: Always phone for you. Okay, good. Bullet points or paragraphs?

[00:15:21] TG: I think it depends on the subject. Sometimes, if you just got to tell me a bunch of really quick facts and like that's what's going to sell your pitch, bullet points. If there's nuance, I'll read paragraphs, write a sentence. Yes. I'm not afraid.

[00:15:33] BB: Short or long pitches?

[00:15:35] TG: That's a tough one. I think, in general, you want to be really short because –

[00:15:39] BB: Three sentences, five sentences?

[00:15:41] TG: Ideally, yes. If you can get it that short, that's great. Yes. If it's three really short paragraphs, that's great. There have been some that I've picked up where they sent me like 5 or 800 words in the email, and it was worth it because it was a really good story. They knew what they were doing, but I think trust your judgment. If you think it's going to be worth it, maybe I'll read it.

[00:16:01] BB: Okay. That's an 800-word pitch. You better damn know what you're doing. Okay.

[00:16:06] TG: That was a little crazy.

[00:16:08] BB: How about images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:16:11] TG: Generally, no. If you're writing about –

[00:16:14] BB: No. All no.

[00:16:16] TG: Yes. I'm trying to think of an example where images help sell a pitch, and I don't think there's ever been one. Sometimes, if it's like, “We've got a new report. It's very interesting. I think you might like to see it,” you send me the attachment. Then I'll open it up. But, also, I don't think that necessarily helped their chances because if I had asked for the report and then I opened it, it wasn't like I would have just said no later. But, yes, I mean, if it's truly relevant, then, yes, why not drop it in?

[00:16:44] BB: Okay. Email or XDM or whatever DM?

[00:16:48] TG: Email, for sure. Occasionally, I'll tell you, my phone number is not hard to find. I put it out there because I want real human beings who aren't professionals to reach out with stories about things that happen to them. My DMs are open everywhere. I've had people take a risk and reach out to me directly that way, instead of over email. I'm definitely going to see it if you send me a DM. But my first response is like, “Who do you think you are? This is my personal space that you're invading here.” Usually, you're burning a bridge with me if you send me a really personal message. Email's the way to go.

[00:17:25] BB: The match is lit. The match is lit.

[00:17:29] TG: If you want to shoot your shot, go for it and see what happens.

[00:17:32] BB: I got to use that somewhere. It's like, “The match is lit.”

[00:17:36] TG: Yes. Don't text me if you don't know me. That feels invasive.

[00:17:40] BB: God. Yes. That's horrible. Okay. How about direct or creative subject lines? We talked on this a bit.

[00:17:48] TG: I think, in general, I'd recommend direct. Sometimes, if it's really funny and you are a creative person, every once in a while, that'll work. Usually, I want to know whether I'm going to be interested in it from the jump. Sometimes, you can get me to open it if you say something really funny.

[00:18:05] BB: Maybe.

[00:18:05] TG: It's a gamble.

[00:18:07] BB: The match is lit.

[00:18:08] TG: The match is lit. The match is lit. That is pretty good. I like that.

[00:18:12] BB: Oh, I do like this. Okay. Press release or media kit?

[00:18:16] TG: I think a press release, just because it's usually more succinct. Sometimes, if there's like GIFs that are interesting about a new feature that I might want to include in the story, that can be kind of cool. That, in general, that's not going to help sell the initial pitch. Maybe on the follow-up, the media kit might be more useful. When we're starting out, yes, press release.

[00:18:35] BB: Then is there a time you usually read pitches? Or is it just all the time?

[00:18:40] TG: It's kind of all the time. I always check my email in the morning, so that's probably your best shot. Sometimes, I'll see an email. I'll get a notification on the weekend, and I'll happen to catch that because I'm not getting a lot of emails then. I think, usually, I'm missing the ones that come during off hours, so I'd say first thing in the morning.

[00:19:01] BB: Okay. First thing in the morning, ET time because you're in New York now, not LA. Keep it in mind. Okay. Then last words, anything, Thomas, that we could celebrate, highlight, champion, et cetera.

[00:19:14] TG: I talk to a lot of other journalists who just hate people that work in PR because your job is to be annoying in a way. I get that. That's tough. I could totally imagine myself in that line of work. I respect what people in the field are doing. It's tough. I sympathize with you.

[00:19:35] BB: Okay. Sympathize with us I appreciate because we –

[00:19:40] TG: People are mean.

[00:19:41] BB: People are mean, you know.

[00:19:44] TG: The world's hard enough without all the meanness.

[00:19:46] BB: Yes, I agree with that. Yet truly, the last people you should ever piss off, your driver or your publicist. Let us remind everybody on this. Thomas, thank you so much for doing this all the way from New York and being here with us. Do not send him a DM, or we will say that the match is lit.

[00:20:07] TG: The match is lit.

[00:20:08] BB: The match is lit.

[00:20:09] TG: The match is lit. That was a lot of fun. Thank you.

[00:20:12] BB: That was a lot of fun. Thomas, thank you so much for being here. Appreciate you.

[00:20:15] TG: Take care.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:20:17] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Thomas Germain from Gizmodo. 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. But until then, start great stories.

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