

EPISODE 214

[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 of Coffee with a Journalist is Anthony L. Fisher. Anthony is the Senior Opinion Editor and a columnist for The Daily Beast, and also writes the Calling Balls and Strikes newsletter on Substack. During the episode, Anthony discusses his strategies for managing pitches, The Daily Beast style preferences, and gives insight into his role, workflow, and time management strategies.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:47] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm BB, and we are here to answer the question, how do we make better relationships with our media reporter freelance and editor friends out there, if we can even say that they're friends. Well, yet to be determined exactly.

With us today is Senior Opinion Editor Anthony L. Fisher. Do I need to say the L, Anthony? That's a good question.

[00:01:12] ALF: I do prefer the L.

[00:01:14] BB: Let's put the L.

[00:01:15] ALF: There's a surprising number of Anthony Fishers out there.

[00:01:19] BB: Yes. Well, ALF is here, as I said, Senior Opinion Editor over at The Daily Beast. We're going to get into it. But welcome, Anthony.

[00:01:27] ALF: Thank you so much for having me.

[00:01:29] BB: Yes, excited. I just was asking this of the earlier person I was recording with Cosmopolitan, so I'm going to ask you. What does The Daily Beast entail coverage-wise in your own words for those who may not be as up to speed? Because there's a lot, by the way, that you all do.

[00:01:44] ALF: Yes. The Daily Beast was originally founded, I think, in 2008. Legendary editor Tina Brown, formerly The New Yorker, and other places was running the show at that point. The way I believe she described it and every editor since has described it is a high-end tabloid. If you look at our site, it's actually laid out like a newspaper. Because of that, we only release a certain amount of pieces per day. Unlike a lot of places, we don't just throw everything up.

[00:02:12] BB: Constantly, constantly, constantly. Yes.

[00:02:14] ALF: Yes. Our headlines are loud, but our journalism is top-notch, both in the reported and opinion capacities. I think the things – at this point, we primarily focus on news of the day, politics, entertainment, culture. We don't really touch on finance. Or sports might come up occasionally. I actually just happened to –

[00:02:37] BB: You just did one on the Oakland A's. Yes.

[00:02:39] ALF: Yes. I coincidentally wrote a piece because it was at the nexus of politics and culture. That's how I justified it.

[00:02:45] BB: Now, you also do a Substack newsletter, Calling Balls and Strikes. You want to tell us a little bit about that?

[00:02:50] ALF: Sure, yes. Prior to coming to The Daily Beast where, again, I still write occasionally, I was a full-time columnist for Business Insider. I just needed a way station for my takes that might not completely fit under the rubric of The Daily Beast to go. So I've written personal essays there about parenting during COVID in New York City. I've written a couple of investigative pieces, personal essays, and just sometimes I even follow up. If I wrote a piece about right-wing influencers talking about that Russell Brand was framed by the deepfake.

[00:03:22] BB: Oh, God. Yes.

[00:03:25] ALF: I did a piece on that, and there was so much outrage from those same right-wing influencers that felt I had to do a follow-up on on my Substack.

[00:03:33] BB: Did you get the same outrage level?

[00:03:35] ALF: No. Because, I mean, I was more like mocking an idea in The Daily Beast one. On the Substack one, I went really at them personally. I had my receipts, so they really didn't have much to say after that. Yes.

[00:03:47] BB: Oh, okay. I want to ask you about this little component which is I think only at The Daily Beast, this little text that's in the red under your by-line. For example, the one you just did on Oakland A's. It says, "Poor little rich men." The next one you have with Elon Musk, you have, "Let that sink in." Then there's other ones, free speech for all and so forth. What are those? Are those just your opinion pieces right there in the sub-headline?

[00:04:11] ALF: Well, every piece has that.

[00:04:13] BB: Exactly.

[00:04:14] ALF: Every news article. It's a Daily Beast style thing. It's called a badge in our parlance. Again, with Tina Brown, a British national who made her fortune here, I believe that there's something about British tabloids where that was a more common thing. I don't really remember it much with the New York Post or The Daily News. But it's kind of like we have a headline ahead. We have a deck. It's like the little slightly longer explanation of what's in the piece. The badge is kind of like a wink. The badge is kind of a – it could be a cheeky joke. It could be a sly reference. It could be a pun. In Elon Musk's piece when I wrote the let that sink in thing, it's all of the things because he infamously walked into Twitter offices carrying a sink.

[00:04:53] BB: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

[00:04:55] ALF: First began his reign of terror over there.

[00:04:57] BB: Yes, exactly. No, they're fun, too, by the way. I encourage everyone to take a look at those. Or they all differ, by the way, like per the piece.

[00:05:06] ALF: Oh, yes. That's the editor's prerogative, but yes.

[00:05:08] BB: Ah, love it. Love it. Okay, Anthony. How is your inbox?

[00:05:13] ALF: Well, I've managed to get it under control. I've managed to make it work. And I think a big part of that is it actually is a blessing and a curse.

[00:05:20] BB: Oh, shoot. Wow. I haven't. I haven't heard anyone on this show say, oh, the emails. I, you know, I'd actually want to get. Everyone's trying to get less emails, but.

[00:05:29] ALF: So, yeah, but it actually, listen, it keeps me from getting too overwhelmed because one thing that I tell PR people and writers is that I just simply cannot give reasons why I pass on things.

[00:05:41] BB: No, you can't.

[00:05:42] ALF:ALF: But I always – even if it's just a random PR pitch. As long as it's the slightest bit of effort involved, I will give a personal response. I feel like doing that keeps my inbox from getting inundated with repeat requests.

[00:05:55] BB: Yes, okay. There you go. Okay. What would you define as a glimmer of attention spent in that pitch? How do you know?

[00:06:03] ALF: Yeah, I'll try to anonymize an example here.

[00:06:06] BB: Yes, please. We love real examples, but you don't have to mention names. Yes.

[00:06:09] ALF: Yeah. If some. If somebody sends me a pitch that is just completely not. First of all, someone sends me a pitch for an interview, it means they don't know what I'm doing, and they don't know that I primarily am editing other people's writing, that I don't do news stories here. So that means you didn't do the slightest bit of homework before you dug up my email address. You probably actually have emailed everybody who has the word editor in their title. So you're gone. You're at the bottom of the pile there for me.

[00:06:36] BB: Okay. Clue number one, strike one.

[00:06:39] ALF: Others getting my name wrong, calling me Andrew or Adam.

[00:06:42] BB: Oh, no.

[00:06:43] ALF: Nope, don't do that. I think also particularly, again, if I sense somebody's put some effort into it, I'll get back to them and say, "Hey, I don't cover this, but here's another editor at the site that does," or, "This just isn't what we do." If they come at me again, I start to wonder if they're a real person. So I will never answer their emails again.

[00:07:04] BB: Do you ever respond to people like, "Are you a bot?"

[00:07:06] ALF: No, I don't have time to troll. I really don't. I got three kids.

[00:07:09] BB: Yeah, you're busy.

[00:07:10] ALF: Yes. I don't want to engage, even for sport. Yes.

[00:07:13] BB: Even for sport, which is kind of what you do with The Daily Beast. But, yes, okay, noted. Is there then on the opposite side pitches that you go, "Oh, how refreshing. I want to open that. I want to investigate."

[00:07:26] ALF: Yes. Putting the word pitch in a subject line is definitely helpful. One thing I try to tell everybody, whether it's PR people or writers, don't apologize at all for pitching. That's a waste of time. That's a waste of time.

[00:07:38] BB: Really? Apologizing like, "Oh. Hey, Anthony. So sorry to send you."

[00:07:43] ALF : "Sorry to bug you. Sorry." Apologize. Just get to it. Yes. But if you're going to get to it, be pithy. Be direct. Don't dance around. Maybe even give me a working headline that is in the style of The Daily Beast, not something that's bloodless like the AP or Reuters or something that's 500 words like Business Insider.

Show me that you did your homework, and you saw our style, and you're trying to sell me a product that I can in turn put on our market. That's how I would describe it. For example, I got a picture that literally just goes like this, "Elon Musk says he's going to colonize Mars.

That would be a disaster.” I know what I'm going to read here now. Now, I can work with that. Yes, it's just the little things. It's like I understand in communications you have to cold email. A lot of times, you just throw in volume, and maybe you will get something out of that.

[00:08:32] BB: That's the bad pitching, though. Let's be frank.

[00:08:35] ALF: It's the vast majority of what I get. I talk to your people. Talk to your business.

[00:08:38] BB: Yes, yes. Oh, man. Okay.

[00:08:41] ALF: But I would say, yes, you can break through the noise. I think most editors are trying to be attentive, like some –

[00:08:48] BB: I think that, too, for sure.

[00:08:50] ALF: Yeah. So if you just respect their work and you respect their time and you don't, like, try to get too cutesy about it, which to me, like, apologizing for pitching is being too cutesy. It's like you're doing your job, I'm doing my job. What do you want from me? Come at me directly, confidently, and show me that you did a little homework, and I will at least afford you that respect in return.

[00:09:13] BB: Okay. Respect in return. That is what we all want I'm thinking.

[BREAK]

[00:09:20] 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]

[00:09:43] BB: Anthony, you have three kids, as you said. You're pumping out these pieces pretty consistently. What's your day like? Is there a time you read the pitches and a time you shut down? What would you say?

[00:09:54] ALF: I mean, I'm pretty much always on in the sense that I got at least keep an eye on the news. Now, I pretty much don't use Twitter anymore.

[00:10:03] BB: I know what a dumpster fire.

[00:10:06] ALF: I have found after 15 years of convincing myself otherwise, that you actually can't keep up with the news without being on Twitter.

[00:10:12] BB: Hey, thank God.

[00:10:15] ALF: So for me, like, I subscribe to about eight or nine different newsletters morning and evening.

[00:10:21] BB: What do you read? Tell us. Tell us.

[00:10:23] ALF: I cut my teeth as a criminal justice reporter, so I always read a project or [inaudible] or sentencing reform. For politics, political playbook, both the DC and New York versions because even though New York's local, if there's one municipality where the local politics goes national, it's New York. I do the AM and PM versions of those. That's four right there; The New York Times morning and afternoon news, New York Times politics newsletter, CNN's reliable sources. It usually comes at night, and it's mostly news about the media.

But inevitably, there's political crossover there. I'm sure there's a handful of others, I think. I read the athletic, the sports, The New York Times vertical. That's my daily news diet. As far as during the day, I happen to be lucky enough to work for a 24-hour news organization. Literally just scanning Slack every once in a while will keep me up to date on breaking news.

[00:11:15] BB: Oh, let me ask you about that real quick, just being on Slack, because all the newsrooms that I've spoken to here are on Slack. But question, do you all post your pieces in Slack like, "Hey, everybody. Just posted." Or are you just – is that too cringey because you, obviously, got the website, and it's posted there? Do you all share like, "Hey, did you see my piece?" I don't know.

[00:11:36] ALF: No. It's more just for just keeping the machine humming. But every piece that is posted goes through a couple of different channels. For example, the social team needs to see what's gone live. Literally, just by scanning those kind of channels, you can see what's gone up that day. Every once in a while, an editor in a broader channel might flag a piece like, "This is a must-read. You got to see this. Holy cow, we had this exclusive."

[00:12:01] BB: Oh, I see. Okay. Okay.

[00:12:02] ALF: But it's certainly not individual reporters or editors going, "Hey, did you see my latest on, I don't know, Mike Johnson, Marjorie Taylor Greene?" Yes, there's a lot of self-promotion within the intra-company Slack.

BB [00:12:15]: Got you. Okay. I'm just kind of curious. Anthony, you were talking about, okay, yes, some pitches that are direct. They're telling me what it is. They have your name spelled correctly. Okay, these are all good points. But is there really anyone who's pitching you something that you ever use because your work is not exactly PR-friendly maybe we should say?

[00:12:35] ALF: Yes. No, but it does happen, though. The big thing with The Daily Beast is timeliness. I wish that we were in a different situation where I had more space and budget for big Atlantic.

[00:12:47] BB: In-depth big thing. Yes, exactly.

[00:12:49] ALF: There always is some space for that. But really, takes that are tied to the 24-hour news cycle are our bread and butter. For example, I have – four hours ago, the Arizona Supreme Court reinstated an abortion ban. I've already published a column on that. That's the kind of stuff. That's the quickest way to yes if you've got a take.

[00:13:07] BB: Hot take that's super-hot.

[00:13:10] ALF: Not a hot take. The news is hot. A hot take is – the connotation of that is generally controversial for its own sake.

[00:13:16] BB: Oh, okay. You don't want that.

[00:13:17] ALF: Yes. Cold take, cold takes about hot news.

[00:13:20] BB: Cold take about hot – okay, perfect, perfect. That leads me to what is, if there are any, sources you want to hear from.

[00:13:28] ALF: If Ukraine or Gaza or something like that is happening and your client is an expert or a professor or has written a book or is on the ground there or something. Yes. Now, you're talking to me.

BB [00:13:42]: Yes. Really, it's like the client who's in the news, in the cycle with authority of some sort I'd say; professor, MD, someone on the ground.

[00:13:50] ALF: Even like – I hate to say this but when there's inevitably a school shooting, I often will get pitches from people who are representing survivors or of victims that kind of stuff in the correct timely fashion could work. I've even had people pitch me book excerpts, where I go, "I'm not interested in the book, but I'm interested in this writer." Sometimes, eventually, it gets to the point where I don't deal with the PR person anymore. They just – the relationship has been established, which I think is what they were going for in the first place when they hired communications people.

[00:14:25] BB: Ah, I see. Would you say it's fair to say like, "Okay, the baton has been tossed. You're in contact now with that source. You take it from here."?

[00:14:33] ALF: Oh, yes. I mean, I definitely prefer to – I'm an editor. Editing with a middleman is – it's just – yes, it slows things down. Speed is everything. Every editor has their own style. I'm particularly direct and, again, try not to waste people's time. Again, being direct with a filter

isn't helpful. It's better to just deal with the writer in real-time. Sometimes, get on the phone with the writer and be like, "Hey, maybe this isn't coming through. This is what I'm trying to get across. What do you think?" It's communication. Sometimes, too many communicators screws up that process.

[00:15:02] BB: Slows it down, too. There you go. How do you get into, Anthony, banging out these pieces? Time is tight. You got to get it out. You have three kids. Are you working at home? Are you working in an office? Do you have an efficiency hack on how you get your stuff out?

[00:15:15] ALF: Yes. Well, I mean, my wife works as well. The Daily Beast has an office in Chelsea which I go to. But I also quite a few days work from home as the morning and afternoon chauffeur of my family. I've been able to mostly game out ways to make that work. Sometimes, news just takes it over, and I can't do anything, except deal with the news. Sometimes, I can tap out for two hours in the middle of the afternoon and handle family stuff. Then I got to work a little later on that night.

[00:15:41] BB: Got it. Be flexible. It may work.

[00:15:44] ALF: For instance, if news broke at night, I would be – a big story that I know we need commentary on, I would immediately, no matter what time of night it was, email or text some of my writers on those topics to see, one, if they've got a take and, two, if they can write fast.

[00:15:59] BB: Oh, wow. So you – okay. If the time then calls, you're like, "Okay, let me text out my people and get them going."

[00:16:06] ALF: Yes. It could be 11 o'clock in New York, but maybe I have a West Coast writer who doesn't mind writing a few hours and can get me something in the middle of the night and either work 24-hour operation. Maybe another editor grabs it. Maybe I grab it in the morning.

[00:16:16] BB: There you go. That's kind of nice. Okay. Anthony, do you ever want to be invited to something like a coffee, like a tea? Are you like, "I'm damn busy. I don't have time for –"

[00:16:27] ALF: To kick around ideas is just not something that I have. No, I'm trying to make time for, like, people who are actually in my life, you know? And I really have time for that.

[00:16:39] BB: Oh, that's true. I appreciate the honesty.

[00:16:42] ALF: Yes. When it's appropriate, when there really is a mutual interest, we certainly get on a call, a Zoom call, a phone call. But it's generally once a relationship is established that I might go, "Hey, let's get coffee. Let's get a drink or whatever." As far as just kicking around ideas, I don't have time for that.

[00:16:59] BB: No. Okay, everybody. I hope that's loud and clear. No ask for Anthony. We're wrapping it up, Anthony. We got a rapid-fire couple of questions here, and let's see what we get from here. Video or phone interviews?

[00:17:11] ALF: What do you mean?

[00:17:12] BB: For a story you're working on, if you're interviewing, let's say, a source. Yes.

[00:17:15] ALF: Yeah. Probably phone.

[00:17:16] BB: Okay. Phone.

[00:17:17] ALF: Less cumbersome.

[00:17:18] BB: Yep. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch.

[00:17:21] ALF: Bullet points.

[00:17:22] BB: Images attached or Dropbox, zip file.

[00:17:25] ALF: Ooh, definitely Dropbox, zip file.

[00:17:27] BB: Okay. One follow up or multiple?

[00:17:30] ALF: One.

[00:17:30] BB: One and done. Direct or creative subject lines? We talked a little bit on this. Direct press release or media kit?

[00:17:37] ALF: Media kit.

[00:17:38] BB: Anytime that you read pitches like, do you want to nail a time? You kind of said all over the place, but -

[00:17:43] ALF: Yes. No, I don't put a time aside for pitches. I take them as they come, and I'm very fast. If I know it's going to be a pass, I will just kind of put a note in my draft saying pass. Then I'll follow up with a human touch a little later. But pretty much know right away whether it's a pass or not.

[00:17:59] BB: Got it. And then is there anything, Anthony, we can promote highlights, celebrate about your work and what you're doing. We just want to shine a little light on you.

[00:18:09] ALF: Yeah, sure. I mean, listen, go to Anthony. I think it's Anthony L. Fisher substack. As long as you got Anthony L. Fisher in there, you'll find me.

[00:18:16] BB: Exactly. You are correct. Actually, that is it. Substack.com.

[00:18:21] ALF: Yep. That is my tag on all socials, including on the former x, where I still have somewhat of a presence. But I'm also on Threads and Bluesky at Anthony L. Fisher. And yeah, just read my stuff at the Daily Beast and read my writer's stuff. I mean, when you see something that's got the opinion tag on it, there's a pretty good chance I edited it, commissioned it. Yeah.

[00:18:39] BB: There you go. Anthony, thank you so much for being here today. Anthony L. Fisher, everyone. Let's make sure we remember the L in there, editor and columnist at the Daily Beast. Thanks, Anthony. And everybody. Don't invite him to some coffees or really anything.

[00:18:54] BB: Speed is of the essence.

[00:18:56] ALF: Nothing personal. Thank you.

[00:18:57] BB: Nothing personal. There you go. Thanks so much, Anthony. Appreciate you.

[00:19:00] ALF: Thanks so much. Great to talk.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:19:19] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Anthony L. Fisher, Senior Opinion Editor and columnist for The Daily Beast. 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.

[END]