

**EPISODE 232**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:08] ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by team at OnePitch. Are you looking for more efficient ways to find and pitch the right journalist? Head to our website at [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Aaron Mok, freelance writer and AI contributor at Observer. During the episode, Aaron discusses how ChatGPT sparked his interest in the AI beat, the types of pitches and sources he prefers, and how PR professionals from AI startups can best engage with him.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:00:45] BB:** Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We're here doing this show, because publicist need help. They need help and understanding how to work better with a journalist, publicist – excuse me. Yes also, they're publicist, but their media contacts and friend, and freelancers, and editors, and basically, everyone in this great environment that we're working called media relations who make the world go around. So, that is why we're here. That's why I also started OnePitch, because we need help pitching better, and being a lesson going to journalists. Hence, this brings us to the show.

Today with us is Aaron Mok. He is freelance writer and AI contributor at Observer, writing on everything AI, which must be quick pace job, Aaron, to say the least. Welcome and thank you for being here.

**[0:01:35] AM:** Thanks for having me.

**[0:01:37] BB:** Yes. Okay, Aaron, just for folks who are not as maybe familiar, because we do want to let people know. How would you describe the coverage of Observer?

**[0:01:47] AM:** Yeah. I would say Observer was interested in the people and power behind business, technology and the arts. The outlet really cares about human stories and really powerful players in shaping society.

**[0:02:02] BB:** Indeed. So, how did you then launch into the AI niche vertical? You used to be other places, of course, but tell us more.

**[0:02:11] AM:** Yeah. Before I started freelancing, I was full-time at Business Insider.

**[0:02:17] BB:** Tech reporter, there. Yup.

**[0:02:18] AM:** Tech reporter there doing breaking news. It was around the time when ChatGPT first came out. That was something that I was covering very closely. From there, there was so much hype around AI that I stuck to it and eventually became my beat. I would say I fell into the AI beat. It's a topic that's also fascinating to me for a while.

**[0:02:42] BB:** How did that fascination come about? Was it through the work previously at Business Insider or you always been captivated? I don't know. You tell us.

**[0:02:48] AM:** I've always been interested in like science fiction movies, and innovation, and the future.

**[0:02:55] BB:** Me, too.

**[0:02:56] AM:** When ChatGPT came out, it seemed like we were getting one step closer to that reality. So, yeah, it was just cool to see chatbots being able to do things that humans can do.

**[0:03:09] BB:** Indeed. Now, let's go to your inbox. That's the topic always covered here. How crazy is it in there?

**[0:03:17] AM:** It's actually not too bad right now.

**[0:03:20] BB:** How refreshing. Why is that? Well, you said, right now. Has it in the past been out of control?

**[0:03:25] AM:** Yeah. When I was a staff writer, it was crazy. I would get probably 50 pitches a day. Now, I've only been freelancing for about a month. So, my email is relatively new. I think publicists are still discovering it. I don't get more than let's say five to 10 pitches every day.

**[0:03:45] BB:** Oh, that's not too bad. Okay, so then what do you do with those pitches? Are you opening every single one of them? This would be like a dream to us publicists.

**[0:03:53] AM:** I do open every single one.

**[0:03:54] BB:** Wow.

**[0:03:56] AM:** Yeah. I usually skim through them if it's something that isn't really in my beat, but I'm just curious to learn more. But if the subject line has a topic I'm writing about or something I'm interested in, then I take a closer look.

**[0:04:10] BB:** Okay. So, if you're, "Oh, I like this." So, then would it be fair to say subject line is not too important since you'll look at every pitch?

**[0:04:18] AM:** I would say the stronger the subject line, the better I tend to like skim through things very quickly. So, if I see embargo or exclusive interview or something about AI related to the news that'll capture my attention more.

**[0:04:36] BB:** Okay. Then in terms of the pitch inside the email, what do you like to see?

**[0:04:41] AM:** Yeah. I do like then embargoes. Do you like exclusive interviews? If there's any interesting data coming out around AI and its impact. I'm interested in that. I also news that are counterintuitive. So yeah, like there's this whole narrative right now about AI potentially replacing jobs. If I see a pitch that says AI could compliment your job, that's something that would interest me, because it goes against what's widely said.

**[0:05:15] BB:** Okay. you're looking for maybe avant-garde, maybe counterintuitive type of people. Then so speaking of that, sources for you look like what?

**[0:05:26] AM:** I am particularly looking for a few different types of sources now. I'm interested in how businesses are using AI internally. How they adopt tools like ChatGPT to make their processes more efficient. For example, people who have used AI in interesting ways. I love to learning about that. Yeah, just like unique use cases for that. I'm interested in like embargoed climate tech deals specifically related to clean energy. That's something that I'm covering more closely now. Just executives at companies that are open to being candid. They're not just here to sell me a product. They're here to talk about what's working, what's not working, any challenges they're facing.

**[0:06:07] BB:** you want them to spill the beans a bit.

**[0:06:09] AM:** Yeah. Just a little bit.

**[0:06:10] BB:** Just a little bit. You don't have to say damn everything, but yeah, exactly.

**[0:06:13] AM:** I also am interested in talking to people who work at companies. Engineers, people on sales teams. If you want to give me an inside look at what's going on. Then that work.

**[0:06:26] BB:** No, wait a second. You don't hear that one too often. People with sales teams. So, why is that? Because they're going to be able to tell you, hey, this is what's resonating or not. You really hear like, oh yeah, let me talk to the sales rep.

**[0:06:37] AM:** Yeah. Maybe not like sales reps in particular, but it's people internally, like anyone who's not an executive, just a normal employee, middle manager. I find that talking to like those people have more interesting anecdotes and are more honest about what's going on at a company versus talking to an executive who is just trying to make the company look good and safe.

**[0:07:01] BB:** Yeah.

**[0:07:01] AM:** Talking points.

**[0:07:01] BB:** You want to hear the scoop.

**[0:07:03] AM:** I do.

**[0:07:04] BB:** You want to hear the scoop. By the way, what's the scoop you're like, "Oh, dang. That's a good scoop." Not naming names, of course, but like recently that you were like, "Oh, yes."

**[0:07:13] AM:** Yeah. I can't think of one at the top of my head, but I think the conversations around like how different tech leaders donating to political campaigns, I find that really fascinating. I'm trying to remember who's the last one. I'm sorry, but –

**[0:07:32] BB:** That's okay. That's okay. But I think you had some subject lines that you were going to share.

**[0:07:36] AM:** Yeah.

**[0:07:36] BB:** Did I open it up? Yes. Tell us. Even though we already talked about how you're going to open all the emails, but yeah.

**[0:07:42] AM:** Yeah. I think I sent it to you over a Gmail.

**[0:07:46] BB:** You did. You did. but I was hoping you can articulate it and read it to live.

**[0:07:50] AM:** Yeah. Subject lines, the AI revolution needs a green makeover. Unlocking the secrets of consumer psychology and tech innovation. Overcome the positive syndrome of these techs.

**[0:08:04] BB:** For you, what stood out for those?

**[0:08:05] AM:** The first one. The AI revolution needs a green makeover. That was one that spoke out to me, because I was doing a story on the carbon impact of AI data centers. I was interested in the solutions to that, it just so happened that I got this pitch with the subject line and it immediately caught my attention. It was a source that was exactly what I was looking for. It was both like timely. Also, relevant to my story.

**[0:08:36] BB:** Okay. Is there subject lines you see, Aaron, you go, “Oh, please, no. Please.” Any or anything where you're like, “No.” This drives me crazy with pitches?

**[0:08:48] AM:** Yeah. I got a lot of pitches unrelated to what I write about. It's about what I'm thinking off the top of my head is here are five tips to overcome imposter syndrome. I don't write about the how, the wellness, anything like that. I also get pitches for different products, because should maybe it's mentioned this earlier, but on top of AI, I also write about climate change and sustainability. It's usually more on the business and tech angle, but I tend to see pitches of sustainable swimwear, or sustainable cups, and lots of products that I frankly have no interest in. Yeah, please don't send those to me.

**[0:09:29] BB:** No, we don't want to see those. Okay.

[MESSAGE]

**[0:09:32] ANNOUNCER:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

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Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

**[0:09:56] BB:** For you, Aaron is making relationships with publicists at all of interest? If so, how do we go about that?

**[0:10:03] AM:** Yeah. I would say it was –

**[0:10:05] BB:** It's okay if you say, no. But oh, what was that?

**[0:10:08] AM:** I would say when I was on staff at Business Insider, it was very helpful to build relationships with PR at big companies like Meta, Google, but now I covered less of big tech and more startups in the space. I find connecting with PR with who represent interesting AI startups is really helpful. It helps me generate ideas. Helps me know what companies are out there. Yeah, I find that it's when I have a relationship with a PR person, they tend to give me more exclusive information and think of me first when they have a story to pitch.

**[0:10:50] BB:** You're like staying on top of mind?

**[0:10:53] AM:** Exactly. Yeah.

**[0:10:55] BB:** Okay. Is there ever a desire of like, “Hey, let's meet up in a person or anything like that?”

**[0:11:02] AM:** I've done it a few times. I'm basically –

**[0:11:03] BB:** That you are like –

**[0:11:06] AM:** Yeah. I mean, I do it if it's a company that I'm particularly interested in. Yeah, it's pretty easy for me to just, top on a train and get a coffee, but I tend to don't do it that often. Usually, I'll hop on a five, 10-minute phone call with a PR rep or we'll just exchange info over email.

**[0:11:29] BB:** That's good. Yeah, that's good enough. You don't just have to go and meet all the people. It's interesting how this has evolved, I will say, because obviously in the COVID time. No one was seeing anybody, but now as we're away from that. There are some people on here who are like, yeah, get me a drink. Get me a coffee. Get me a thing. Some are still like, yeah, I'm good. Hit me up on email. I'll see you there. You know?

**[0:11:50] AM:** Don't get me wrong. I love being wise and dying.

**[0:11:52] BB:** Oh, okay.

**[0:11:55] AM:** Time is a scarce resource.

**[0:11:56] BB:** Scarce resource. I mean, if I was in your – I would never be meeting with a gazillion of – no, no. Unless, unless, we've worked on seven stories together. I'm the senior vice president of columns at Microsoft. Something I really, really want. Other than that, seeing the inbox. It's good. Aaron, what additionally would you to get off your chest about publicists?

**[0:12:21] AM:** Yeah. There are a few things that I don't want to see or don't love seeing. Tell us, please tell us everything.

**[0:12:29] AM:** Yeah. One thing that I've encountered is when PR professionals over promise. What I mean by that is there's been incidents where I've been offered an interview. I say, yes, and I take it. Then it turns out they're not available by my deadlines or they can't do it anymore for whatever reason. It's an issue, because I tend to base my deadlines around getting access to sources. So, if I pitch an editor being like I have this interview secured, my deadline is in two days and I can't get it, then the story gets it's done.

**[0:13:06] BB:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah. This is a pet peeve I've heard numerous times on the show is like, you're like, "Oh, my gosh. I have this person. This person. This person." Then you're like, "No, you don't." Because you can't get me that person until three weeks later.

**[0:13:18] AM:** Exactly.

**[0:13:19] BB:** Yeah. Okay. What else did you want to add?

**[0:13:20] AM:** Yeah. I cover business and tech and sometimes I get pitches that are too product focused. I think the tricky thing about being a business journalist is that you have to balance the line between writing about the business, but also not doing marketing for them. So, when I do



tech stories, I want to understand why it's important as supposed to how the product, why the product is great or what the product can solve, because it's not really my job to try to do for marketing.

**[0:13:53] BB:** Introduce that. Yeah, exactly. Anything else?

**[0:13:57] AM:** Please don't pitch me through signal or text.

**[0:14:00] BB:** Oh, oh, yeah. No, no. First of all, how do you find your text? What? No.

**[0:14:05] AM:** I do have my number.

**[0:14:07] BB:** Oh, no. Aaron, that's why then.

**[0:14:10] AM:** Yeah.

**[0:14:12] BB:** It's your own fault, sir.

**[0:14:14] AM:** Yeah. It was helpful when I was at Business Insider getting scoops and sources would reach out to me about like things happening within the company that's I hear less from those people now. It's more PR people's just texting me saying, "Hey."

**[0:14:30] BB:** God. No, no. I'm sorry to hear that. Okay. Thank you, Aaron. That was helpful to hear, you for your pet peeves further. You know what though, further, since we're on the topic, do you have the opposite where you're like, "Oh, I love when people do this."

**[0:14:45] AM:** Yeah. I love it when pitches are very clear about why the pitch matters and how it's related to the news. So, if they can put it into context for me. It's speeds up the pitch and process quite a bit. I guess the example is AI, like the green data center story I was talking about, there's been lots of coverage around the carbon footprint of data centers. When I got the pitch, this how data carbon data centers could be decarbonized is perfect, because it mentioned the news, it gave me research for its carbon footprint. It also answered why it mattered, which is

to help reduce emissions. That was in the media, yes, for me. I hopped on a call with that source, like the same day.

**[0:15:34] BB:** Good to know. Aaron, I have a quick rapid-fire question set. Are you ready? Great. Video or phone interview?

**[0:15:41] AM:** Video.

**[0:15:42] BB:** Oh, okay. Can we talk about that for a second? This is also a controversial one. Video, why is that? You want to see people's faces? Make sure they're not a bot.

**[0:15:49] AM:** I do want to see people's faces. I also find that interviews are better when I could see them. It feels more authentic and genuine. I can pick up on cues where if someone is not interested or not knowledgeable about a certain topic. I'll change, it has a different question or if something's really talking a lot about something. I'll ask them more about it. Hopefully, we do the interview better.

**[0:16:15] BB:** Plus, I think you get my take more attention as in my eyes are on the screen looking at you. Hopefully, that would be my fun. Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

**[0:16:28] AM:** Bullet points.

**[0:16:30] BB:** Short or long pitches? Probably short.

**[0:16:32] AM:** Short.

**[0:16:34] BB:** Images attached or a drop box zip file?

**[0:16:35] AM:** It doesn't really matter to me, but I would say images attached.

**[0:16:41] BB:** Email or DM of any sort?

**[0:16:43] AM:** Please email me. Do not DM me.

[0:16:45] **BB:** No one wants a DM. Listen. One follow-up or multiple?

[0:16:49] **AM:** I would say follow up two times tops. There'll be situations where they follow up every single day for like a week.

[0:16:58] **BB:** Oh, no, no, no, no.

[0:17:00] **AM:** I don't like that.

[0:17:00] **BB:** I feel you. Direct or creative subject lines?

[0:17:04] **AM:** Direct.

[0:17:05] **BB:** Press release or media kit?

[0:17:06] **AM:** Press release.

[0:17:08] **BB:** Time that you read pitches or is it all the time?

[0:17:10] **AM:** I usually read it first thing in the morning, maybe around nine, but my inbox isn't that crazy right now. I check every other day.

[0:17:20] **BB:** Can we talk about that? Because did you in the previous life, what's the comparison here? Were you like, "Oh, my God, I always getting 400 emails a day." Now, you're down. What's the gap?

[0:17:31] **AM:** Yeah. When I was on staff, I was getting probably like 50, 60 emails a day.

[0:17:37] **BB:** Just pitches?

[0:17:38] **AM:** Just pitches from a different yard. Now, it's more like 10 to 15 a day.

**[0:17:45] BB:** Okay. Yeah, as you mentioned, or even four or five. Let me ask you this further. Did you have a different strategy than when you were full time there? Did you go through all the pitches like you do now?

**[0:17:55] AM:** I'm not really inbox zero person. A subject line that wasn't interesting, I would just ignore it and keep going. I don't even click them. But similar to what I do now, if something really sticks out, like if it's counterintuitive or if there's an interesting data point or an interesting source relevant to a story I'm working on. I pull that –

**[0:18:14] BB:** Well, those are all my rapid-fire questions for you, Aaron. Is there anything we can do to promote, celebrate, highlight you? You tell me.

**[0:18:22] AM:** Yeah. I guess you can find me on Observer. I'm a regular – there and I'll be publishing some lots of interesting stories down the line. I have Twitter. You can follow me @aaroncmok. Yeah. I think that's it.

**[0:18:37] BB:** Okay. Aaron, thank you for being here today. We are so, so excited and love that you're doing the deep dark work, I would say, of AI work. We could have had a whole other podcast here about what your thoughts are and all that stuff, but that's not this podcast, so we're going to keep it moving. But Aaron, thank you so much. Aaron Mok, he's a freelance writer and AI contributor at Observer. Thank you for being here.

**[0:19:00] AM:** Thanks, Beck.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:19:02] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Aaron Mok, freelance writer and AI contributor at Observer. 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, but until then, start great stories.

[END]