

EPISODE 256

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:09] 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 to the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Grab your cup of coffee and get comfy. Today, on Coffee with a Journalist, we're hanging out with Connie Guglielmo, editor-at-large at CNET, and a tech journalism pro. Based in the heart of Silicon Valley, Connie spills the tea on what makes a pitch really stand out, and what definitely doesn't. If you're a publicist trying to level up your pitching game, you won't want to miss this one. Expect plenty of sharp insights, hilarious stories, and tips you can actually use. Enjoy.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:50] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, and we do a lot of things on this show, but mainly to talk with reporters, editors, journalists, the people that make the media world go round, and how we as publicists can better work with people so we make our lives more enjoyable together. Hopefully, Connie. Hopefully. That's the goal. That's the goal. I'm very excited for today because we have newly promoted editor-at-large of CNET, Connie Guglielmo, and so excited to have you, Connie. And it's the end of January, how are we doing so far?

[0:01:24] CG: I think we can all agree that this has been a whirlwind of a month, and for those of us here in California, like I am, with relatives in Los Angeles, it's been a very busy and crazy time.

[0:01:36] BB: It has been. What a time. What a time. Well, welcome, and thank you for being here.

[0:01:41] CG: Thank you.

[0:01:42] BB: Connie, for those who maybe are not as familiar, I do like to start out with saying like, “Hey, how would you describe the editorial content of CNET in your own words?”

[0:01:51] CG: Sure. CNET is a tech site that is focused on consumers. That's an important distinction because a lot of media writes for businesses, B2B, or they write for investors, or they wait for specific audiences that are niche. But because CNET is for a consumer audience, that's you, me, your parents, your friends, your partners, your colleagues, we need to have pitches that are for the average person who is trying to make sense of the world through that lens of primarily, technology.

[0:02:27] BB: I assume then you get a lot of more enterprise-y pitches.

[0:02:30] CG: I get enterprise pitches. All the time I get pitches about people raising venture rounds. Great for them. Happy that they're doing it.

[0:02:40] BB: No one cares for you at CNET, yes.

[0:02:42] CG: That's not our wheelhouse.

[0:02:43] BB: Yes, got it. So, you're inbox-ing, Connie. Let's go into that. What's in there? What's in there? Cause you're also editor-at-large, maybe it's a little different than a reporter, but maybe not.

[0:02:52] CG: Sure. So, for the entire time, I was that interns for CNET for 10 years before switching two years ago and doing our AI stuff. I did an investigation into AI for editorial reasons and now I write a column about AI and stories about AI. So, I've seen the pitches across the gamut of my career as you could expect. As usual, I get a lot of pitches that are not relevant because they're not relevant to what we write about. I get a lot of pitches that are, I would say several hundred words long, which no one's going to read more than two paragraphs in a pitch. I get those all the time. Then sometimes I get pitches addressed to dear in certain names, which I always find very entertaining. So, those are the not great pitches.

[0:03:39] BB: Those are the past, yes.

[0:03:42] CG: Yes, so the good pitches are ones that know that I write about AI. Of course, I know everyone at CNET and if I read a pitch and I think it's interesting, I'll forward it on to the person on the team who I think would be the right person to get that pitch in. If I'm feeling charitable, I'll respond and say, "Hi, thank you for your pitch, but actually you want to talk to so-and-so. I've CC'd them here." But that's a step that I don't necessarily should be taking, but I do it to be nice sometimes if I have the time.

So, you want to know who you're writing to and what they write about. Obviously, 101, publicist 101. But it's very funny how often that is not the case. So, good pitches are pitches that in the subject client tell you they're exclusive. They have a time element, like they're reacting to something in the news or they're offering you something that is going to have a fast turnaround. So, I look for those kind of pitches.

[0:04:38] BB: How often are you looking through your pitches in your email? Is it constant for you?

[0:04:43] CG: Okay. I'm one of those people who can't sign off until my inbox is at zero. The way that I do that, because when I –

[0:04:50] BB: Yes, how do we do it? How do we do it?

[0:04:52] CG: Yes, when I worked at Bloomberg, I was getting 1,200 or so pitches a day. My career, we didn't talk about that. I worked at Bloomberg. I worked at Forbes. For the past decade, it's been CNET. When you get that many pitches, the only one way to clean out your inbox is you respond, you delete, or you forward it on to someone else. I very rarely save something for later, because if you save something for later, now you're adding to the next load.

[0:05:18] BB: Yes, exactly.

[0:05:19] CG: So, I don't use my inbox as a way to save pitches. I either say, I'm interested, or I'm not interested. I delete it if it's just totally irrelevant or if I think it's worthwhile for someone

else to look at I forward it on. By doing that, I go through my pitches. I might inbox, throughout the day to get it down to zero.

[0:05:38] BB: Yes. Wow, okay. I haven't heard of like kind of the three-rung approach here. You're going to delete it, you're going to forward it, you're going to respond. Boom. That's it.

[0:05:47] CG: The response could be I need more information, for another email. Fair.

[0:05:51] BB: Which then the ball is back in their court. So, that's good.

[0:05:54] CG: I guess you're choosing to engage. Everyone has their own methodology when it comes to their inbox. I'm just telling you that's the way that mine works. And no judgment however you do yours, but when I see somebody who has like 10,000 unread emails, I have a heart attack.

[0:06:09] BB: Oh, try 60,000. I mean, I think the record on here is like close to 100,000.

[0:06:13] CG: Yes, just, look –

[0:06:16] BB: For me. No, no. I'm a zero. I got to be on the zero. It's so satisfying to be on the zero too. You know what? Google gives you – little Gmail gives you a little dopamine hit because it goes, “Hooray,” or it says, “Wahoo, you have zero.” Do you get that too? I'm like –

[0:06:32] CG: I just know it's zero. So, it makes me feel better.

[0:06:37] BB: Okay. A little bit more about your role, Connie, because it again, depends, when we're talking to reporters, they're like, “I get a pitch, I think about, I have to pitch the story to my editor. Now, your editor-at-large. So how does it work with stories for you?”

[0:06:51] CG: So, I am focused these days on AI, Generative AI and how it affects consumers, the way that we're going to live, the way that we're going to work, the way that we're going to engage. I'm looking for stories about new things, obviously new tools, new ideas about ways that you can use AI to hopefully enhance your life. I'm also looking at threats and concerns that

people should be aware of when it comes to AI. And then I'm looking for interesting people who can talk about what's happening in the world. Sometimes they want to talk about a product that they're building and a company they're building, but there's so much happening in the world.

This is true for anybody who covers news. You should know. You're constantly writing stories if you're a beat reporter and you're reacting to what's happening in the news. One of the things that a good reporter will do is try to find context from people who know what they're talking about. So, if something happens in the news, okay, well, let's talk about AI since that's what I cover. China has released its version of an AI engine that is supposedly faster and better than ChatGPT at like a fraction of the cost.

[0:08:01] BB: Everyone's freaking out.

[0:08:02] CG: People are freaking out. It's a top downloaded app from the iPhone app store. So, people are interested and they're using it. Okay, so now you have user interest because it's the top-downloaded app. You have competition between the US which is spending billions upon billions of dollars in AI and China, which is one of its fiercest rivals in a lot of these technology marketplaces. So, should we be worried? Who can answer that question? It depends on who you ask.

So, if you have an expert who has answered that question, not, well, we have a tool that can rival theirs. Okay, that's fine. But should we be worried? Answering the question that people are asking, like, what does it mean? How does it change the kinds of tools that I'll be able to see? This is happening at a time when we're all talking about TikTok or a lot of people in tech are talking about TikTok. Do I trust a Chinese company? Because when I enter stuff into an AI, I'm putting in my IP when I ask prompts. Should I trust it?

A lot of the stories that are out there from a just a news perspective, which are totally valid are what is this Chinese AI engine? When was it released? What does it do? Now, it's caused all of these stocks to tank. But the average person and maybe people – well, unless they're investing and they're –

[0:09:16] BB: Unless they're investing, they're Wall Street, yes, of course. But to your point –

[0:09:19] CG: The Wall Street people care, but –

[0:09:21] BB: Like is my app working?

[0:09:21] CG: Yes. Those Wall Street people are reading their financial analyst reports, and they're getting a lot of debriefing at a much deeper level than you're going to get from a news story. So, then the average person. What does the average person want to know? Should I download it? Should I have been one of those people that download it? Maybe not. Maybe you're concerned about privacy and security and you don't want your prompts going to the Chinese government, assuming that's where they're going. These are questions that reporters are trying to answer. If somebody in your roster of clients is an expert in the field –

[0:09:55] BB: Then good.

[0:09:55] CG: – then that's a topical way to get in the news for this week.

[0:10:00] BB: Yes. Let's back up a bit more before I go down the other thing. So, Connie, for you though, is your staff coming to you, reporters, journalists saying like, “Hey, Connie, I want to write these three stories this week.” What do we think? How is that happening?

[0:10:11] CG: So, when it comes to things on AI, now I'm the expert. Look, I've been a tech reporter in Silicon Valley for a long time. People ask me all the time about their advice, but typically in a news organization, they will go to the editor to get their idea vetted, right? Everybody knows how that works. Somebody like me who has a lot of expertise across tech to my staff, I'm a resource. What do you think about this? Do you know somebody I can call? Do you know someone I should ask? So, I maintain a very healthy roll of decks, although I know that's not a phrase people use anymore of context that I can say you should try this person or that person.

Because talking to people and getting them on the phone or on Zoom or whatever your mode of communication is, as quickly as possible on breaking news is key. So yes, people ask me about AI stories and what do I think of them, because I've been writing this for two years and there's

not that many of us who really know the topic area in journalism right now. That's changing. There will be many more journalists, but it's still a growing thing. So, I say, yeah, that's not a great story or these are the issues you want to look at. I do that pretty much across tech. So, somebody like me who's an editor-at-large, the reason I'm an editor-at-large is because I have all this experience and I want some freedom and flexibility to write what I want, which is why I write columns and stories that I come up with as opposed to being assigned. But then I serve as a reference and resource to the B reporters.

So yes, you want to be my friend if you're trying to get to other people at CNET, but don't do it with a generic pitch.

[0:11:44] BB: Perfect. Good to know. Okay.

[MESSAGE]

[0:11:49] 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]

[0:12:12] BB: Connie, is there a way for publishers to make better relationships with you? Do you want to go in person somewhere? Tell us.

[0:12:19] CG: Yes. I mean, I am looking for access to interesting people and the higher profile the person and the more difficult they are to get access to, the more I appreciate it. So, there are tons of CEOs out there at startup companies who are lovely to talk to and super eager to talk. That's fine if they have an interesting background. But if you're the one who started a company and then now is on your fourth company and you're good friends with all of these

other connected people, like I'm looking to build a network of connections. So, you want to get in my good graces. There are three ways.

Number one, introduce me to interesting people that are hard to get. Number two, give me an exclusive that no one else has so that everyone has to come to my story or our site to read it. So, exclusive. Number three, is really know what's happening in the news and then what stories I'm working on or my colleagues are working on that you can provide that immediate help. It doesn't help to say, "Hey, yes, this is happening." Okay, let's say, I'm not the TikTok reporter, but Abrar Al-Heeti at CNET has been doing a lot of media on TikTok.

You can say, "Well, I know somebody who knows a lot about TikTok and can talk to that." And then you say, "Great, when can they talk?" And then they say, "Well, let me get back to you." Okay, now you've wasted time. Come with the item on the menu, like –

[0:13:47] BB: Here do you want it right now?

[0:13:49] CG: Yes. I can offer this person at 11 o'clock. Are you interested in talking to them that or at 1 o'clock? 11 o'clock, 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock, whatever it is. So, it's satisfying that immediate need. People, exclusives, and instant gratification.

[0:14:04] BB: Excellent. Love that. I love that. Great rundown on this, Connie. Appreciate it. Okay. You talked about the relationships. Do you ever want to be in person with folks?

[0:14:16] CG: Yes. I mean, it depends on, I'm based in Silicon Valley. So, people come to Silicon Valley a lot. It's fairly easy for me to meet up with people here. But again, if I'm meeting them for the first time, or I'm building a relationship, then I'm going to talk to them over time. Look, some of the biggest stories and the most important stories that I've written over my career at Bloomberg, Forbes, Mac Week, name it, have come from conversations that I've had with people over time.

The first time I might talk to someone, and it's just like a get-to-know-you conversation, then another time it might be about a pitch, and then a third time it could be just a topic. Sometimes these conversations are just on background. People just want to gauge where they feel

comfortable talking and they want to know that they can trust me as a reporter. So, I am looking to build relationships, not just the one-off hit, if that makes sense.

So, to have that in-person meeting, okay, what's the purpose of the meeting? Is it to have like a deep dive conversation?

[0:15:18] BB: Starting off with that.

[0:15:19] CG: Yes, and if it's a product demo, product demos are totally valid, but now we can do those over Meet, or Zoom, or whatever, pick your poison. So, there's only so many hours in the day for all of us, and so it's trying to be efficient about that.

[0:15:33] BB: Let me ask, is it, I would imagine, immensely valuable being right in the center of it, in Silicon Valley?

[0:15:39] CG: Well, for technology, yeah, it is. Although tech is a worldwide phenomenon, there are people all over the world. Look, I don't need to meet someone in person. There are people in the old days before we had video conferencing that I only ever talked to you over the phone for like years. And then when I met them in person, it was shocking because I had never met them in person. I'd only talked to them over the phone. I don't know if anybody can relate to that besides me, but there were the times when you only talk to people on the phone.

[0:16:07] BB: Yes, when you see them physically, you're like, "Oh, wow, that was the conversion, at least for me, when you saw people in the flesh after only on Zoom in the COVID times."

[0:16:14] CG: Yes, absolutely. It was the same. So, I don't need to meet people in person to build a relationship with them. What I need to know is that they have an area or topic of expertise or coverage and they're willing to talk to you. Some of the best conversations are just on background like, "Hey, these are the questions people aren't asking that you should be asking." That's super helpful to reporters because we all want to know, okay, there's a who, what, where, when, why, how, but the way that you get more compelling stories is to ask the questions that people don't think to know to ask, right?

If someone can provide that insight, that is another point in their favor. Just like I have conversations with executives all the time about their companies and what I think of their business models. I'm like, "I'm not your investor, I'm not your business manager, but I can tell you how it'll be received. If you put out that story, okay, you're one of 10 people doing that product. So, what's the competitive advantage?" Then, this is what you guys do as publicists. You're always trying to figure out what is unique, what is different. And then for some reason, as a favor, I will do that. And then I will just tell them, "No, it's not unique or different." And then the PR person on the other end of the line, afterwards, will always say, "Thank you so much for telling them. I have said that 50 times that but needed to hear it from someone else."

[0:17:33] BB: Oh, honestly, that is so helpful when the journalist just declares it such. And you're like, "Yes, been saying that for 10 weeks, but now you heard it live." That is helpful, that is helpful.

[0:17:42] CG: If you can get the journalist to do it. So, I will do that as a favor sometimes for people who've been very helpful for me, but it's not because I take pleasure in making somebody feel better bursting their balloon, it's just being pragmatic. There's only so many stories you can write, so many hours. Look, here's my PR 101 I'll give you, because I had a short stint as the head of corporate communications for Hewlett Packard, anybody who looks at my bio will know that. It was interesting being on the inside versus the outside. But it was for seven months, and it was on purpose, and that's a different story for a different day. And it gave me a lot of interesting perspective on how executives view reporters and peer.

But peer 101. Every reporter, when they pitch a story internally to their editors, "Hey, I want to write a story about this." Other than massively raking news, the government has denied TikTok. You have to write the headline on that story because you've done some reporting. A headline is 65 to 70 characters. That's it.

[0:18:43] BB: Characters.

[0:18:43] CG: Characters. That includes spaces. After that, it goes to dot, dot, dot in Google, right? The headline runs out. Now, that's not just how you can't have a longer headline, you

can't. But generally speaking, go just do a survey, Google News or wherever you get your news and check out the, I dump them in a document and see how long they are on average. That means that every single character matters. So, words like new, revolutionary, breakthrough. I don't know. They're just a waste of characters, because of course, you're going to think they're revolutionary or breakthrough. And if they're not new, why are they news?

So, write the headline on the story yourself, before you pitch it. Because if you can't write it, and you're expecting the reporter to write it, yes, a reporter might have additional insight or might want to pull on an angle or a thread. But that's your subject line because or it's a first sentence of your pitch, because that's what they have to do. As a reporter and an editor, I used to have to do like 20 different versions of the headline before they would get approved. So, I would say, well, how many versions of the – I guess you write press releases or your pick, right? But think in the way that a reporter thinks. What's the headline on this story? And give it to me in 65 to 75 characters. And if it's not something that you would click on, don't pitch it because you are your own gatekeeper. Like, I think a lot of times people write for some other mythical art. Well, I don't like this story. I think it's boring, but I'm writing it for somebody else.

[0:20:17] BB: You know what? If you're not proud to pitch it, it's a no. That's our rule.

[0:20:21] CG: And if it doesn't make sense or you're – I'm not the audience for this. Well, then don't and get somebody who is because then you don't know what you're talking about and your squandering your characters. So, write that story. I would say when I was doing PR internally, I would tell executives who would say, “Hey, we have this news. We want you to pitch it.” And I'd say, “What is it?” And then they would tell me and I'm like, “Okay, give me the headline for that story. What is your ideal version of the headline on the story?” And they would write, they would say, someone so announces revolutionary, new. Okay, well, revolutionary, new, right? I don't know. Payment service. Well, there's already like a thousand payment services. So, revolutionary, new are wasted words.

So, what is it? Is it free? Is it privacy-protected? Is it a cashback one? What's the competitive advantage that you're going to use instead of revolutionary. Let me tell you, a lot of the executives, that's not their ability. They don't know how to do that. But that's where you add the value out.

[0:21:23] BB: That's why you're here, publicist. Exactly. Exactly. Connie, so many gems in this. I appreciate this.

[0:21:30] CG: Of course.

[0:21:30] BB: We do have a quick rapid-fire question list here. So, let's get in here and we can kind of wrap this up. Okay. Video or phone interview?

[0:21:39] CG: Video.

[0:21:41] BB: Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

[0:21:43] CG: Bullet points.

[0:21:44] BB: Short or long pitches? I'm sure that's short.

[0:21:46] CG: Short.

[0:21:47] BB: Short. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[0:21:52] CG: Nothing attached. It'll be pulled up on the spam filter, and then chances are you won't even get the email. The images and attachments come later after you've built a rapport.

[0:22:04] BB: By the way, do those get then filtered through okay, the spam filter? Like once there's a back –

[0:22:09] CG: I mean, I have to remember to go to my junk file and spam. I think the last time I checked, like three months had gone by. Because like you said, you're getting pitches every day. So, if you don't want to get caught in spam or any of those kind of filters, do not send an attachment until you're asked. Because then I'm looking for it, right? Hey, I'll send you the press release or I'll send you the link with all the media or I'll send you the Dropbox thing and then I'm like, "Hey, I didn't get it. Oh, maybe it went to spam."

[0:22:40] **BB:** Then you look, okay, yes, that's good to know. Email or a DM of some sort for a pitch?

[0:22:46] **CG:** I mean, email is fine. DM is if it's like, "Hey, I have, I don't know, who's high profile –"

[0:22:54] **BB:** Yes, someone's super high-profile, you're like –

[0:22:56] **CG:** "I can get them on the phone with you in 15 minutes. Do you want to talk?" Then, sure.

[0:23:01] **BB:** Yes, that's a hot list.

[0:23:03] **CG:** Or if you know me well, you'll know to text me because you'll have my text.

[0:23:07] **BB:** Okay. This is good. One follow-up or multiple?

[0:23:10] **CG:** One follow-up.

[0:23:12] **BB:** One and done. Yes. I think we covered this. Direct or creative subject lines? Sixty-five characters. I think we got that down.

[0:23:18] **CG:** I would say compelling subject lines.

[0:23:21] **BB:** Compelling subject lines.

[0:23:23] **CG:** And if they have the words scoop, exclusive, that's going to be a trigger. New, revolutionary, breakthrough are going to be junk mail.

[0:23:32] **BB:** Oh, I'm going to write that soft note. New, revolutionary, boom, junk. Okay.

[0:23:37] **CG:** If it's not new, why are you sending it? Nobody's going to say old software.

[0:23:43] BB: You have an old pitch? Oh, okay, yes. Press release or media kit?

[0:23:47] CG: Neither one at the start. I need just the pitch and then I will get more information. I mean, you should have probably a backgrounder. I call them a one-page backgrounder, maybe an FAQ if it's a complicated topic. But yes, I don't know beyond that. I mean, those serve different purposes than reporters generally need unless they're working on a long-term feature story and are collecting a ton of information.

[0:24:08] BB: - We already kind of covered this. What time do you usually read pitches? You just got to get to zero at the end of the day. So, I assume it's all the time?

[0:24:14] CG: Pretty much, I mean, I have meetings and I have things to do during the day, but first thing in the morning, I'm in California, so that's specific time. I go and do a fast scan, clean out my inbox first thing, get down to whatever I need to do, and then I will periodically check-in.

[0:24:33] BB: Connie, is there anything you want to promote, celebrate, tout, besides everyone get on CNET and read up?

[0:24:39] CG: Yes, I would say, look, we live in a world where there's a lot of noise and there's a lot of misinformation, right? We all know this. And AI, I'm sure some of you are using AI tools to help generate your pitches and whatever. I'm not going to stop you from doing whatever you're doing. But because we live in a world where there's so much, people like me are looking for exclusive, impactful, interesting, compelling, and we want to be the first to break it. This is the exclusive part, but we're also looking for opportunities to get into the heads of people on behind the scenes.

So, think about long-term stories like the inside story of how a product came to market. Hey, and reporter, I will give you embedded access. You can come in and come to company meetings and sit on things for the next four months, of course, under whatever your NDA process is, so that you can have the story, the inside story, the behind-the-scenes story of how this came to be. Those things take time and they take an investment on the part of the reporter and on the part of the company. Obviously, some stories are more complicated than others.

I wrote the story of Dell taking themselves private when I was at Forbes. And that took me eight months, but they invited me in. I got to go to employee gatherings and I talked to people. I got a lot of inside info. So, that one, that story came out and it was the cover story for Forbes. It had a lot of depth and a lot of color, but you only give that to one reporter. You give them a timeframe and say, "Do you want the story? We're going to give you all this access, et cetera, et cetera." And if they say, "Maybe that's not good," because then you can just move on to the next reporter because people are looking for these kinds of stories. So, set a deadline for the reporter as well, unless you really just want that one person to write it and then you're going to have to accept it or not accept it. Right?

[0:26:38] BB: Mm-hmm.

[0:26:39] CG: That's it.

[0:26:40] BB: Connie, what a juicy, dazzling little array of nibbles we got on this podcast today. So good, so good. Sixty-five characters, I'm going to definitely remember that.

[0:26:51] CG: - If you can do it in 65, you're doing really well. That's why I tell people 65 to 75, give yourself some grace, but really go to whatever, front page of anything right now, copy 10 headlines into a Google doc or Word doc, whatever you're using, and check the character count.

[0:27:06] BB: Boom, done. Connie Guglielmo, she's editor-at-large at CNET, everybody, AI, AI all the way, but consumer. Don't be pitching her anything enterprise about your funding announcement. Jesus, no.

[0:27:18] CG: If you're pitching CNET in general, consumer.

[0:27:21] BB: Consumer, consumer, with a C, just like CNET. Perfect. Thank you so much, Connie, this was fun.

[0:27:25] CG: My pleasure. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:27:28] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist episode featuring Connie Guglielmo, the editor-at-large at CNET. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co/ podcast. We'll see you all next week, but until then, start great stories.

[END]