

EPISODE 63

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products and business news. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like and how they connect with sources. If you're an avid listener to this podcast, we'd love to hear from you. Leave us a review to share your thoughts about past episodes and help spread the word to new listeners.

Today on Coffee with a Journalist, we're joined by Steven Aquino, a freelance journalist and contributor to Forbes, TechCrunch and Macworld. Steven covers technology, accessibility, special education and more. He's been a journalist since 2013 and writes a weekly column at Forbes about accessibility and assistive technology as part of their diversity and inclusion coverage.

During the episode today, Steven tells us about his unique perspective when it comes to writing about accessibility, the shift in his inbox now that he writes at Forbes, his favorite quarantine activity and more. Let's dive into the episode now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:22] BB: Hi, everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalists. We're in season two. I'm Beck Bamberger, the co-founder of OnePitch and also of BAM, the agency that handles a bunch of crazy startups and technology-focused initiatives. Super excited today. On our show is a contributor to Forbes whom we love. Friend of BAM, Steven Aquino. Welcome, Steven.

[00:01:49] SA: Hi there.

[00:01:49] BB: Hey! Thanks for being here, Steven. I'm excited.

[00:01:53] SA: Yeah. I haven't done a show in a long time. So it's fun.

[00:01:58] BB: I'm excited. Let's start first with your inbox, Steven. Actually let's even start back to you. I know we just had our little overview about you. You're fluent of course in English, but also American sign language. So your focus is on accessibility and the technology that is provided to those that need accessible products. What though would you like to further add to that so we can better understand your beating coverage, because it's quite particular?

[00:02:25] SA: How you said it is actually good. What I write about is accessibility and how technology helps us and does not help us.

[00:02:41] BB: That's pretty wide in a way, because more and more technology is addressing now probably for the first time, really, people who need accessibility like never before, and I think it's important work.

[00:02:53] SA: Yes indeed.

[00:02:54] BB: Tell us then about your inbox, Steven. So do you get a lot of pitches? How do you suss through your pitches?

[00:03:01] SA: I actually do get a 10. Since I started at Forbes last April, my inbox has gotten fuller at an exponential clip because I'm on a huge outlet and people see me now. So how I suss out my work? It's hard. I mean, I know a lot of journalists think that, like, it's hard to like sift through the junk. But it's hard because I get a lot of stuff that is just like copy-pasted and it's really not easy to come across somebody who not only says hi, but says that they've seen an article I wrote and talked about kind of who I am and stuff and then kind of went into their idea, right? And I'm always on the lookout for that stuff. And certain people do it better than others, but it's hard.

[00:04:19] BB: What's your favorite type of pitch if you are to ever get one look like?

[00:04:24] SA: Well, from the PR person, I really want them to be human. Like I want them to say like, "Hey, Steven, I saw you on Forbes. I saw you on iMore," wherever, and I thought of an idea, "Here's a company or someone you should talk to." Like I don't want to see like just a generic like here's a hearing aid. For some reason –

[00:04:57] BB: Here's a hearing aid. What do you think?

[00:05:01] SA: Like, No. I think I said this during our AMA, but I get a lot of pitches for hearing aids.

[00:05:08] BB: Really?

[00:05:09] SA: I don't know why. Like don't just tell me that that there's a hearing aid out there and it's super great. I'm not a hearing aid reviewer. My hearing is actually not that great. But, yeah. No. I want to see a story where it like connectst like technology with the human element. So I had a story done recently about Hiki, which is a dating/social app for people who are on the autism spectrum. And I talk to the founder and the CEO and it's an app, right? And it's also like connecting people. And so I got to really connect the tech to the human, and it turned out to be an awesome story and I got lots of people enjoyed it. And those are the kinds of stories that I want. Like I don't want – I mean, I can do like a straight story about news, like stuff happens. There's an app update, yadi-yada. Like I'm happy to do those too, but I really want a human sort of tie in to the whole thing.

[00:06:34] BB: I love too on this particular piece you're mentioning, you open up with the paragraph saying like, "Oh, you know how being signal is hard." And like, seemingly, you were single for eons, but then you found your partner on eharmony and now you're approaching your seven-year anniversary. So like you tie in that personal approach, which I think is great.

[00:06:52] SA: Yeah.

[00:06:52] BB: Is there a pitch recently that you were like, “Wow! Yes, that is the one,” that you can think of?

[00:07:00] SA: Well, actually it's funny, because I'm working on an article now about mental health, and it's a personal thing for me. I mean, I'm not going to go too deep into it, but –

[00:07:18] BB: Not out yet. Yes.

[00:07:20] SA: Certainly had my struggles with mental health, and even right now I still do.

[00:07:30] SA: Don't we all?

[00:07:31] BB: Well, I mean, I have a lot of thoughts on that, but that's not for now. But I got this pitch from someone who talked about mental health in the context of what we're all going through. And I started to think about it in an accessibility wins. And when I talk to her more about what she was trying to do, the person who contacted me, I thought, “This is going to be a great story because I can tie in all these ends. I can even throw in my own sort of slant on it.” So I'm excited to have that out there soon. It's been a slow story to write because I'm kind of struggling with some stuff. So it kind of fits.

[00:08:23] BB: Yes. Yes. Makes sense. We have an audience ask coming from Nicolette from Market Impact, and she wrote in. This is a specific question for you, Steven. What are you working on right now and what's the best way to interest you in a story? So is there a way that her pitch could perhaps stand out to you in the many that you get besides, okay, human connection?

[00:08:45] SA: Well, as I said, the human part. But at the same time if it's around technology in some way, like if it's an app, if it's a social network, if it's a service, if it's, I don't know, a hotline. I mean, something to do with technology and you can help me with understanding how

the tech is proving people in terms of accessibility and stuff, that would be something that I would definitely be up for looking into.

As for what I'm doing now, I just got through talking about my article on mental health. I don't have anything else in the hopper at the moment. With my call a little bit at Forbes, I can pretty much write anything I want so long as I stay in my swim lane as it's called over there. So after I'm done with this article, I'm open to whatever else comes down.

[00:09:58] BB: Nice. Okay. So you're on the prowl. You're looking for stuff.

[00:10:01] SA: Yeah.

[00:10:01] BB: Awesome. I love it.

[BREAK]

[00:10:05] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to onepitch.co to learn about our new OnePitch score and see how easy it is to find the right journalist to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:10:29] BB: Steven, when we're thinking about just how you come up with your story angles and just the inspiration of it, some people get it from pitches, although rarely I have to say after doing this show for so long it's like that really does seem to come from pitches. Where do you get your inspiration for a story? Ever from pitches?

[00:10:46] SA: So that's a good question, because the time I've been at Forbes I've seen it shift in how I get story. So like I said, like I get email all the time, right? So that's the outlet for article ideas. But at the same time I really find that where on in my career I was more trying to think of ideas, like how to use certain features? How certain software helps me, that sort of thing. But now that I have this outlet at Forbes, I've really started to kind of shift into like a more I don't want to say like straight news, but I tend to take a look at the cycle of stuff that's happening. So like Apple has a feature in the iOS beta now where if you wear a face mask and an Apple Watch, your Apple Watch can unlock your phone. And there are accessibility stuff to that. So I'm thinking about an article somewhere down the line about that.

[00:12:18] BB: It sounds like you're sometimes inspired by what the tech giants, I know you've covered Apple for ages, for example, are doing and like what is their traction as it relates to thinking of accessibility if at all.

[00:12:32] SA: Yeah, that's exactly right. And I do write a ton about Apple because I'm established there and I talk to them all the time, but I do write about Amazon and Google and Facebook. And I do cover know smaller startups and such too, but I really do kind of keep by ear to the big tech companies because there's no – They will always be doing something that has hooks that I can hang on to.

[00:13:12] SA: Which in a good way isn't that good. I don't know if we could say the same 10 years ago or 20 years ago, would you say?

[00:13:20] SA: Yeah, it's a different world for sure.

[00:13:24] BB: That's good. There's progress happening. What are you reading, listening to, enjoying on Netflix, Steve? And we'll take anything. Is there anything you're loving right now?

[00:13:34] SA: Well, I'm a nerd. So I am re-watching The Flash on Netflix.

[00:13:44] BB: The Flash. Wow! An old one. Oh! Am I thinking something else?

[00:13:51] SA: Yeah. It's a show that came out that started in like 2015, 2014.

[00:13:56] BB: Oh! Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. 2014 it says on here. Yeah. Okay. So it's a little old. It's not too old, but yes.

[00:14:02] SA: And so I've seen the show a hundred times. So it's not as if I haven't seen it, and I don't know what happens, but it's a fun show. And when I'm tired and I have to like veg out and just like stare at my screen, like I can just watch something, "Oh, yeah, he did that. Oh, yeah, he's going to say that." Like I don't have to think about much.

[00:14:29] BB: I cannot remember where I saw this article, but it was something, it was during this pandemic time of course, that was talking about how we get so much comfort from watching reruns of things that we know. Like we've already watched it four times, but you like to watch it because you're like, "Okay, it's comfort," right? You like know the characters. You know what they're going to say. There's something about that. I got to find that article. One of my employees mentioned it to me. She's like, "Oh, yeah. I'm like re-watching My Sex in the City season five or whatever," and you're like, "You know you watched that 100 times, but it doesn't matter."

[00:15:01] SA: It does not matter. I don't care.

[00:15:03] BB: Yeah. Okay, The Flash. I'll put that on my list. Okay, Steven, I have a few fill in the blanks here. So I will read the phrase and you fill in whatever you feel like. Does that sound good?

[00:15:15] SA: All right. Sounds good.

[00:15:17] BB: Let's do it. My favorite publicist always –

[00:15:20] SA: Says hi.

[00:15:22] **BB:** So simple. Steven! So simple. The most annoying publicist always –

[00:15:29] **SA:** Copy and paste.

[00:15:32] **BB:** You'll get a response from me if –

[00:15:35] **SA:** I remember your email.

[00:15:38] **BB:** There you go. You will never get a response from me if –

[00:15:42] **SA:** You copy and paste.

[00:15:43] **BB:** There you go. There you go. No copy+paste. That's my takeaway from today. You can follow-up with me if –

[00:15:51] **SA:** If I haven't responded.

[00:15:55] **BB:** At all ever? Or like people who follow-up with you like 8 hours after they sent a pitch?

[00:16:01] **SA:** Yeah. You can follow-up with me if I haven't responded after like 2 or 3 days. How is that?

[00:16:09] **BB:** Okay. That's good. That's good. My perfect Sunday is –

[00:16:13] **SA:** Staying home. I shouldn't say that.

[00:16:17] **BB:** You can elaborate, Steven.

[00:16:19] **SA:** Stay home and watching TV whole day.

[00:16:22] BB: That sounds nice actually. And COVID-approved. Very good.

[00:16:27] SA: COVID-approved. That's right.

[00:16:29] BB: The nicest thing I ever heard about my work was –

[00:16:33] SA: Ooh! This came to me just recently.

[00:16:36] BB: Ooh!

[00:16:37] SA: So it's sort of a longer story, but I'll try to shorten it. I got an email from the founder and CEO of Hiki after my article went up and he said that he was at a loss for words at how good and well-written my article was and he thanked me for doing truly life-changing journalism.

[00:17:10] BB: Oh, that's incredible. Good story. The last best thing I ate was –

[00:17:17] SA: Probably a donut.

[00:17:19] BB: Oh! Nice. That sounds delicious. Quarantine taught me –

[00:17:24] SA: That I need to get out of the house more.

[00:17:29] BB: My favorite stories to write are –

[00:17:32] SA: Probably new iPhone reviews. I've reviewed every one since 2014.

[00:17:43] BB: That's a lot of phones.

[00:17:45] SA: I've kind of got it straight going.

[00:17:48] BB: You do. One thing I think people should know more about me is –

[00:17:53] SA: I'm fluent in AAL.

[00:17:55] BB: Yeah, American sign language.

[00:17:59] SA: It's a part of me that I don't use that often anymore because of certain circumstances that I won't get into here, but it's a part of me that I don't really share often because it doesn't come up a lot.

[00:18:17] BB: Although we mentioned that in your bio, because that is cool. People should know that. Okay. Steven, what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:18:28] SA: Ooh! Boy, isn't that a loaded question?

[00:18:29] BB: We could be here for hours.

[00:18:31] SA: We could do a whole show on this. Okay, I'm going to try to condense this because I know we don't have all that much time. I really hope that for a tech journalism, where I work, I really hope that long-term, that accessibility privilege. I shouldn't even say tech journalism, because tech journalism is only a small aspect, but I hope that disabled people are more sought after and represented and covered in journalism.

I think there's – Again, without, getting too far into it, there's this whole conversation about diversity and inclusion. People who talk about it don't talk about disabled people enough. And it's not an either or thing, but disabled people are 25% of the population. And if you look at that stat with how we're covered by The Times, The Journal, Channel 4, like whoever, like it's really lag far behind. And when we are covered, it's more, “Oh, great. Whittles Stevie is like, he can't see out of his right eye.” And like, “Look at him overcome all these obstacles.” And that's not good either.

And so I really hope that if the pandemic has taught us anything, just having to adapt and stuff I'm hoping that people will take those lessons about being flexible and having to adapt to things. I mean, I hope that we are more represented in the media more.

[00:20:48] BB: Do you know, Steven, anybody else similar to yourself that's covering accessibility? That has any limitations that you kind of pal around with or anyone else that you want to give a shout out to basically?

[00:21:02] SA: I mean, there is a friend of mine who I've talked to a lot at covering Apple and stuff. He's on YouTube. His name is James Rath.

[00:21:13] BB: James Rath.

[00:21:16] SA: As I said, he's a YouTuber who talks about accessibility in technology, and he and I have been friends for quite some time since I started here. And, yeah, aside from him, there're not many people who are like covering this. Like I feel like I'm the only one who's really doing it as far as like the traditional way, like not video, and it's odd. I mean, I shouldn't say it's odd. Certainly, it makes me feel as if sometimes I'm the Lone Ranger on this topic.

[00:21:59] BB: Yes. That's why we're so happy to have you here.

Well, Steven, I'd like to end with our favorite part, my favorite part, which is our mad libs. So I'm going to give you a word, you toss me back a word, and then I'll read back our paragraph, if that sounds good.

[00:22:14] SA: Okay.

[00:22:15] BB: Are you ready?

[00:22:17] SA: Yes.

[00:22:18] **BB:** Okay. What's an emotion? Any emotion?

[00:22:22] **SA:** Sad.

[00:22:23] **BB:** Sad. What about an adjective? Any adjective.

[00:22:28] **SA:** Slow.

[00:22:29] **BB:** Slow. And then another adjective.

[00:22:33] **SA:** Hot.

[00:22:34] **BB:** Hot. How about a greeting? Any type of greeting you'd hear?

[00:22:38] **SA:** Hi there.

[00:22:40] **BB:** Hi there. And a verb.

[00:22:43] **SA:** Eating.

[00:22:44] **BB:** Eating. What is a noun?

[00:22:47] **SA:** House.

[00:22:48] **BB:** House. How about an adjective?

[00:22:52] **SA:** Small.

[00:22:53] **BB:** A cringe-worthy PR term.

[00:22:55] SA: Content.

[00:22:57] BB: Content. A part of a pitch? Any part of a pitch you would get.

[00:23:02] SA: Hope to hear from you.

[00:23:04] BB: Hope to hear from you. Yes. Length of time.

[00:23:09] SA: Three hours.

[00:23:11] BB: Three hours. Name of a real person, ideally alive.

[00:23:17] SA: Tim Cooke.

[00:23:19] BB: Tim Cook! Yes. Mr. Apple. And then an emotion.

[00:23:24] SA: Happy.

[00:23:24] BB: Happy. Okay. Steven, here we go. When I think of the future of journalism, I feel sad. The pitches I receive have gone from slow to hot. If I receive a pitch that starts with, "Hi there," I start eating. When I write stories on houses, I kind of feel small. My favorite pitches include content and a very specific hope to hear from you. I normally take around three hours to respond to emails, but if it's Tim Cook, I will respond immediately. If you do not get a response back from me you should know I am very happy for.

[00:24:02] BB: Wow!

[00:24:03] SA: I kind of like this one. This is a good one.

[00:24:05] BB: I have not received an email from Tim Cook.

[00:24:08] BB: I'm waiting for you, Steven. That'd be a good day.

[00:24:11] SA: I mean, I have interviewed him, but I have not gotten any mail from him with any scoops or anything because that's not how Apple does things.

[00:24:24] BB: I was to say, but you can hope exactly. Put it on your vision board.

Steven, thank you so much for being on today. This was such fun. And you're doing great work. We so appreciate it and we appreciate you.

[00:24:41] SA: Thank you for having me. It was fun.

[00:24:45] BB: It was.

[OUTRO]

[00:24:47] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Steven Aquino. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. And if you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch and subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at onepitch.co. We'll see you all next week with a brand new guest and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]