

Episode 65

[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 of 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.

On today's episode, we're joined by Simon Cohen, a contributing editor for Digital Trends' Entertainment and Home Theater sections. Simon covers consumer technology, including audio and video products. He has been a journalist for over 15 years and has written previously for VentureBeat and OZY. During the interview, Simon shares more about being a technology reviewer and the influx of products he receives, how he reads every email that lands in his inbox, his favorite Danish drama on Netflix, and more. Let's hear more from Simon now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:17] BB: Hi, everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. I have coffee. Simon does not apparently, but Simon Cohen is here today. He's a contributing editor for Digital Trends, one of my favorite publications. I look at it pretty much every day, Simon, just so you know. He's also a freelancer writing of all things technology, especially anything that has dings and pings and keyboards and things. Simon, thank you for being here.

[00:01:44] SC: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:46] BB: Yeah. We were just talking about how many laptops do you have, sir.

[00:01:50] SC: Well, right now just the one.

[00:01:52] BB: Just the one. Okay.

[00:01:53] SC: Yeah.

[00:01:53] BB: Okay. But you were saying you have a lot of just tech gear, tech stuff all over the place.

[00:01:57] SC: I do, yeah. I mean, as a technology reviewer specializing in audio and video, I probably – It's a bit of a running joke in our household. The door rings probably twice a day with another set of ear buds or headphones that had been sent to me.

[00:02:11] BB: And now, of course, because the COVID's coming to your doorstep, not the office. Oh, my.

[00:02:14] SC: Right. It's a constant battle not only to deal with the incoming hardware but also just to find a place to keep this stuff because I don't just sort of review it and then immediately send it back. I quite often keep the stuff on hand so that I can compare it to every new set of headphones that comes in.

[00:02:31] BB: Gosh. You would probably need even just like an assistant for shipping management returns.

[00:02:36] SC: Let's just say it's a source of tension in our household.

[00:02:38] BB: I got you. Okay. Wow, got you. Well, instead of what's happening in the household with all the gear, what about your inbox? How is your inbox?

[00:02:48] SC: Yeah. The inbox is non-stop I have to say. I know some people practice inbox zero. I'm at the opposite end of the spectrum. I'm like in box infinity. This just – It's never ending.

[00:02:58] BB: Okay. Wait a second. Wait a second. As in you just let it ride with the unread or you read them all or what would we say?

[00:03:06] SC: Yeah. Well, I mean, I would say that I read everything that comes into my inbox. If anyone is pitching me out there and you're wondering why I haven't responded, it's not because I haven't read it. That's for sure. I read every single email that I get but I just don't have time to file them or decide whether I'm deleting them or keeping them, so I just let it ride. I think I've probably got well over 5,000 emails in my inbox right now.

[00:03:28] BB: Wow.

[00:03:28] SC: Yeah.

[00:03:29] BB: Okay. So they just let it ride. How many pitches do you get a day would you say?

[00:03:34] SC: I'm going to say on any given day between 10 and 15 pitches.

[00:03:38] BB: That's not obscene. Okay. I've heard hundreds before here, so okay.

[00:03:44] SC: Yeah, I know. People have been pretty good about not filling my inbox with pitches on a daily basis, but what's not so great is most of those pitches are not actually targeted at me.

[00:03:54] BB: Okay. Despite your low volume, the quality is also extremely low.

[00:03:58] SC: Yeah. I mean, it really depends on – Some people, PR folks know me. We've got a personal relationship. They know when to pitch me, when not to pitch me, but I also seem to get a ton of sort of PR blasts through [inaudible 00:04:11] and that stuff. It's just not targeted.

[00:04:14] BB: Yeah, not at all. Now, you said when to pitch you and when not to pitch you. When do we pitch you and when do we not pitch you?

[00:04:20] SC: Like during the day.

[00:04:21] BB: Yeah.

[00:04:22] SC: Or times a day.

[00:04:22] BB: Do you have kind of a prep? Do you have like Friday I wish to have my pitches? I don't know. Do you have a preference?

[00:04:27] SC: Well, I mean, it really depends on how timely it is. If it's timely, pitch me immediately. If it's embargoed, any time of day is fine. If it's something that really ought to –

[00:04:38] BB: Wait though. Wait though because we've been talking about this in a variety of circles. Embargo time. How much time do you want in order to write a piece if it's going to be under –

[00:04:51] SC: Good question. Yeah. It really depends on the nature of the piece. If it is a really fairly complex piece that's under embargo, like let's say we're talking about some kind of brand new sound system that's never been seen before, and there's a lot of technical aspects to it, a longer embargo time is really appreciated. It gives me time to really think about it and get in touch with follow-up questions. Maybe even conduct an interview if necessary, as opposed to something where it's just like a new set of headphones that pretty much have more or less the same features that other headphones have out there. But maybe it's just a lower price or something. That like 24 hours is more than enough time.

[00:05:26] BB: Okay. 24 hours. It's pretty good. What takes – This might be a different type of answer given the type of stuff you do, Simon, which is very specific. It's hardware. It's an audio. It's in home theater. Okay. That seems a little obvious. But in thinking of creating a piece, are you ever just like meandering, taking a walk? You're in the shower and you're like, “You know what? I haven't done,” like this article you did in February, the best Netflix hacks tips and tricks. How do you come up with a great story that you want to do?

[00:05:57] SC: It's very impromptu. I find that conversations are often the biggest driver for new ideas. So I'll be chatting with my editor, Caleb, and he'll mention something like, “We really need to update our streaming device coverage.” That will trigger a thought that had been lurking in

the back of my head, which was, “You know what? I’d really like to find out how many of these streaming devices will let you connect a USB webcam for doing Zoom chats on an actual TV.” I said, “We should do something on that. Let’s help people figure out if they can do that with their device. If not, what device do they need to buy to be able to do that?” It’s really conversations that trigger a lot of this stuff.

[00:06:37] BB: So you’re just chatting it up?

[00:06:38] SC: Yeah.

[00:06:39] BB: It comes about.

[00:06:40] SC: Yeah.

[00:06:40] BB: Got it.

[00:06:41] SC: That’s actually I think the hardest part for a lot of folks about not being in the office these days is those sort of impromptu conversations just don’t happen.

[00:06:46] BB: I know. I know. I know. I know. Yeah. It’s hard because people are starving for that big time.

[BREAK]

[00:06:55] 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 RESUMED]

[00:07:19] **BB:** That's why I think people are going to be back in the office, wanting to some level to get that.

[00:07:24] **SC:** Totally.

[00:07:24] **BB:** Well, let's play a little fill in the blank finish the sentence type of scenario here, Simon, if that makes sense.

[00:07:30] **SC:** Okay.

[00:07:31] **BB:** I got about 10 of these, so here's the first one. My favorite publicist always –

[00:07:36] **SC:** Reaches out to me first with an exclusive.

[00:07:40] **BB:** Yes, exclusives. The most annoying publicist always –

[00:07:44] **SC:** Pitches me stuff that is so far outside of my beat. I don't know what they're thinking.

[00:07:49] **BB:** You'll get a response from me if –

[00:07:52] **SC:** You create a pitch that is super concise and lets me know exactly why I should care.

[00:08:00] **BB:** You will never get a response from me if –

[00:08:02] **SC:** You don't include my first name at the top of the page.

[00:08:07] **BB:** What? What are they – Are they just saying, “Hey, friend?”

[00:08:12] **SC:** No. Usually, just hi. If it's just hi, then I know that I'm part of a massive outreach campaign.

[00:08:20] BB: You can follow up with me if –

[00:08:22] SC: If I don't respond to a targeted pitch within 48 hours.

[00:08:28] BB: It would be a huge help if you –

[00:08:31] SC: Include as much information as you can about whatever the pitch is related to. So if it's a product, tell me everything about the product. If it's new, I want to see images. If you've got a video, even better. Ideally, I should be able to construct 90% of the story that I'm writing from the pitch itself.

[00:08:49] BB: Wow. Just from the – Okay. You're definitely a more is more type of person.

[00:08:55] SC: For sure. I mean, by that what I'm saying is make sure all that information is in the email one way or another, whether it's an attachment or deeper in the body. I mean, you should absolutely make a really concise summary at the top so that I understand exactly what I'm getting myself into. But the moment I decide, yup, this one's for me, then I want to know it all.

[00:09:16] BB: Yes, perfect. Okay. Next thing. My perfect Sunday is –

[00:09:23] SC: Waking up late, having a long coffee, reading a book. Yeah.

[00:09:29] BB: For me, it's the New York Times with a lot. Yes. Isn't it reading like the most luxurious thing?

[00:09:38] SC: It's the best. I mean –

[00:09:39] BB: Reading for pleasure.

[00:09:41] SC: Totally. Unfortunately, most of my reading for pleasure happens right before I go to sleep at night, and it's just not a high quality of time. So if I can get some weekend reading time, that's the best.

[00:09:52] BB: Yeah. The last best thing I ate was –

[00:09:56] SC: Last night. My kids made their – Because of COVID, they're both at home, and they've both been really getting into cooking, and they've been making some amazing dinners. Last night, they made these delicious risotto cheese balls with an arugula salad, like really gourmet.

[00:10:11] BB: Wait. How old are these kids?

[00:10:13] SC: 16 and 19.

[00:10:14] BB: Okay. I was going to like fall off the chair if you were like six and nine. Oh, my god. Okay. Wow.

[00:10:19] SC: Yeah. The three-year-old's amazing in the kitchen.

[00:10:24] BB: Quarantine has taught me –

[00:10:27] SC: I miss hugs. I do. I miss that physical connection with people.

[00:10:32] BB: I feel you. My favorite stories to write about are – Well, I think I could surmise that but you tell me.

[00:10:40] SC: Any story where I've got an opportunity to take what might be a kind of complicated technological concept and really distill it down so that anyone can understand what's going on.

[00:10:53] BB: One piece of advice for aspiring journalists is –

[00:10:58] SC: Ask questions. Try to engage your innate curiosity about whatever it is you're writing about as much as you can. I mean, a lot of us end up having to write about things that we have zero personal interest in. But if you can sort of take a look at the story that's on offer

and just ask yourself some questions, “Why is it this way? I don’t understand these details. How can I get more out of that,” and really probe, I find quite often that’s when your real enthusiasm for a story gets engaged when you activate your curiosity.

[00:11:30] BB: Speaking of curiosity, we always like to ask folks what are you reading, what are you watching, what are you binging, listening. I’ll take anything. You got any books, thoughts, shows?

[00:11:41] SC: Do I? Absolutely.

[00:11:41] BB: Let’s go out. Tell me. I get all my recommendations for Audible on this podcast, just so you know.

[00:11:46] SC: Okay, yeah. No books on tape at the moment, but I’m part of a book club, so I’ve always got something on the go. The most recent one that I’m actually right in the middle of right now is called Doughnut Economics by Kate Raworth.

[00:11:57] BB: Doughnut Economics.

[00:11:59] SC: It’s a fascinating look at why our classic understanding of economics and why everyone who’s ever been through university and taken an Econ 101 course –

[00:12:08] BB: That was my major. You’re speaking my language.

[00:12:10] SC: Yeah. This is all about why those lessons are basically invalid in the sense that they just don’t reflect how the world works, and they certainly don’t reflect how economics needs to be seen in terms of the fact that we live on one planet with finite resources in an environment that only has so much capacity to deal with our activity.

[00:12:32] BB: I’m into it. I just bought it. Doughnut Economics, seven ways to think like a 21st century economist. I’m down.

[00:12:38] SC: It’s fascinating.

[00:12:39] **BB:** I'm down. What is this book club, by the way? Is this like you guys hang out on Zoom or did you meet in person? Or what'd you do?

[00:12:45] **SC:** Yeah, no. I had one of my best friends from high school called me up out of the blue a couple of years ago, and he said, "I'm starting a book club. I think you'd be great." I'm like, "Okay." I'm like, "I'm in, for sure." He gathered together four other guys, five other guys. By the way, it's an all-male book club because it was established in response to his wife's all-female book club.

[00:13:06] **BB:** How funny.

[00:13:07] **SC:** He said, "I'm tired of hearing my wife talking about all these great books. I'm making my own book club with the guys."

[00:13:11] **BB:** Oh, god. Good for him.

[00:13:14] **SC:** Yeah. It's been great because not only has –

[00:13:15] **BB:** I love it.

[00:13:17] **SC:** Yeah. Not only has it offered us, especially during the pandemic, a great way to keep in touch and really keep our brains active. But because so many of the books that are getting chosen are things that are way outside what we all would normally choose for ourselves, it's been a terrific exposure to new things.

[00:13:32] **BB:** That's so great. Okay. What else you got?

[00:13:35] **SC:** Another book that we did recently was called *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* by Isabel Wilkerson.

[00:13:41] **BB:** That is raging on all the bestsellers right now still.

[00:13:44] SC: What a terrific book. Speaking as someone who is probably right in the key demographic of folks who need to read a book like that who understand its content, I was blown away by some of its insights.

[00:13:58] BB: That's a Oprah Book Club one pick too.

[00:14:01] SC: It is, yeah.

[00:14:01] BB: As well. Okay. Any shows, anything else you want to add?

[00:14:05] SC: We just wrapped up the third season of Borgen on Netflix, which it's a Danish political drama.

[00:14:12] BB: What?

[00:14:13] SC: Yeah. It's –

[00:14:14] SC: [inaudible 00:14:14]. I'm looking it up.

[00:14:15] SC: I know. It was recommended to me by my Dad who kept going on and on about it. It was actually kind of funny. Every time we would do a Zoom call and we do them every few weeks, he lives in Florida, he would say, "I don't know if I've told you this, but we've really enjoyed this Danish political drama," so we finally did it.

[00:14:30] BB: Is that not parents 101? They will tell you.

[00:14:32] SC: Totally.

[00:14:33] BB: Seven times the thing. That is their thing, and you got to just pretend like it's the first time you've heard it.

[00:14:40] SC: Well, what can I say? Repetition apparently works because we finally just ended up trying.

[00:14:44] BB: See, they wear you down. Okay. I'm on it. It's from 2010, so it's been a while. Okay.

[00:14:48] SC: It has, yeah.

[00:14:50] BB: But you love it. Is it good?

[00:14:51] SC: It's really well acted. The writing is excellent, and I'll be honest here. We're listening to it dubbed in English. We're not using subtitles, because the dialogue is like west wing dense. It's really dense, and there was no way we were going to be able to read and watch at the same time, so we went with the English dubbing. You do get to the point where you can just kind of ignore the lips. Just don't watch the lips. That'll throw you right off.

[00:15:16] BB: Yeah. Got it. Okay. I'll put that on my list. Need a classic like 10 years ago. Okay. Excellent. Well, Simon, you've been in the journalist game for a while, as we talked about the top of the show with your bio and stuff, even though you did start out with PR it looks like. You were a developer and then eventually you got into the PR side. What do you think the future of journalism is?

[00:15:41] SC: That is such a tough question to answer because it feels like it changes constantly. A few years ago I would have said the obvious thing like, "Oh, well. It's all going online. Everything is going to be digital, but it'll pretty much be the same as print." Now, I don't know, now with the influence of a social media and how social media itself appears to be changing every 6 to 12 months. I mean, who could have predicted the success of TikTok even a year ago? Well, maybe my 16-year-old probably could have predicted it, but I certainly couldn't have. So I find this fascinating in terms of what it means to reach an audience.

[00:16:18] BB: Yeah. I was just going to say, if you think back and go, "Oh, let me tell you. There's going to be this app," and you're like, "What is it?" "Well, people dance."

[00:16:27] SC: Yeah.

[00:16:27] BB: You'd be like, "Shut up. No, people aren't going to do that." But here we are, and it is such a thing.

[00:16:33] SC: It is. I confess I still don't understand that thing. I don't actually get TikTok. I've seen it obviously and I know it's huge but I still don't really understand how if I wanted to as a journalist I could actually use it.

[00:16:47] BB: Yeah. I hear you on that. I hear you. Some people –

[00:16:49] SC: But I might just be too old.

[00:16:50] BB: That's okay. That's okay. Okay. Back to the future of journalism, keep going. We had to do a little sidebar there.

[00:16:56] SC: Yeah. In terms of the rest of the future of journalism, I'm worried quite honestly. I'm worried that what we're seeing is an awful lot of publications focused on their clicks and on their page views and on their advertising. I'm not entirely sure that's always driving the highest quality of content, and we see this at Digital Trends too where we're always writing that line of, "Okay, what do we have to do to get Google to play nicely with us without selling our souls?" We don't want to get into the click bait game. We don't want to produce a crappy quality of content. We want to make sure that when our readers arrive that they're getting something of value. But as you know, creating something of value takes time, and it's sort of the adversary of quantity. I don't know the answer. I really don't.

[00:17:43] BB: No one does, Simon. So hence we are here. Well, on a lighter note, is there something that you wish you would have wrote or like you're like, "Dang, someone got the exclusive on that. Why wasn't it me?"

[00:17:56] SC: That's – When I read that question before we started, my interpretation was who is writing stuff that I wish I had written or who do I admire when I look at stuff. So I'm going to sort of change that question a little bit and say that whenever I read stuff from David Pogue who is a journalist who used to cover technology for the New York Times on a regular basis, whenever I read his material, I'm always amazed at the fact that I know he's incredibly well-

versed in technology, probably knows more about it than anyone. Yet when he writes, he distills everything down for an audience that is not tech savvy and does it in such an entertaining and engaging way that whenever I write, I always – Part of my brain is thinking what would David Pogue write because I think he's just that good.

The other journalist who I love is Ta-Nehisi Coates who almost never writes about technology, but it doesn't matter what he writes about. I find him just incredibly thoughtful and thought-provoking and engaging. He manages to ride this line between getting enough context into his articles that I find I really understand what he's talking about but without getting bogged down in the details, which is never good.

[00:19:11] BB: Yes. Say that again for everyone listening.

[00:19:15] SC: Who are the author is?

[00:19:15] BB: Mm-hmm.

[00:19:16] SC: Ta-Nehisi Coates.

[00:19:17] BB: Ta-Nehisi Coates. There you go.

[00:19:19] SC: I assume that's how he says his name. I hope I'm not butchering it.

[00:19:22] BB: I was going to say Ta-Ne Coates. Let's see where he's writing lately for people who want to know.

[00:19:27] SC: He's with The Atlantic.

[00:19:28] BB: Yes, okay. I was like, "Oh, yes." God, The Atlantic does good stuff.

[00:19:32] SC: They sure do.

[00:19:32] **BB:** We haven't had too many Atlantic people on for this show. It's something I'll tell Jared to make a note in here. Okay, Simon. Now, we're going to play our final little part, the mad libs, which is so fun. I'm going to give you a word, and then we'll fill it in, and then I'm going to read back the whole thing if that sounds good.

[00:19:48] **SC:** Yup. Go for it.

[00:19:49] **BB:** Okay. First is an emotion.

[00:19:52] **SC:** Sadness.

[00:19:53] **BB:** Sadness. An adjective.

[00:19:56] **SC:** Squishy.

[00:19:57] **BB:** Squishy. That's fun. Another adjective.

[00:20:01] **SC:** Sleek.

[00:20:02] **BB:** Sleep?

[00:20:03] **SC:** Sleek.

[00:20:04] **BB:** Sleek.

[00:20:04] **SC:** Yes. S-L-E-E-K.

[00:20:05] **BB:** Yes, okay. Got you. Sleek. Okay, a greeting.

[00:20:09] **SC:** What's up, Internet?

[00:20:11] **BB:** Gosh. Have you seen that lately? I hope not. I feel like that's very old.

[00:20:18] **SC**: No. I keep running into it.

[00:20:19] **BB**: Gosh. Okay. A verb.

[00:20:22] **SC**: To type.

[00:20:23] **BB**: To type. A noun.

[00:20:27] **SC**: Plant.

[00:20:28] **BB**: Plant. An adjective.

[00:20:31] **SC**: Dramatic.

[00:20:32] **BB**: Dramatic. All right. A cringe-worthy PR term.

[00:20:40] **SC**: Wow. That's –

[00:20:41] **BB**: There's so many to choose from. Yes. I know.

[00:20:42] **SC**: So many to pick from, yeah. Color ways.

[00:20:46] **BB**: Colorways?

[00:20:48] **SC**: Colorways, yeah. That's companies constantly talk about the fact that their product comes in different colors, and that's really what they should say. This comes in three different colors. But, nope, it's three different colorways.

[00:20:59] **BB**: I have never heard that. Wow. I'm learning here. Colorways. Okay. A part of a pitch.

[00:21:08] **SC**: Part of a pitch?

[00:21:09] **BB**: Yeah. Like the opening, the clothes, the –

[00:21:14] **SC**: Okay. How about the kicker?

[00:21:15] **BB**: Okay. The kicker.

[00:21:17] **SC**: If there is one. They don't often have one.

[00:21:18] **BB**: If there is one.

[00:21:19] **SC**: Yeah.

[00:21:19] **BB**: If there is one. Okay. Length of time.

[00:21:23] **SC**: 20 milliseconds.

[00:21:25] **BB**: And then a name of a real person ideally alive.

[00:21:29] **SC**: Justin Trudeau.

[00:21:31] **BB**: Justin Trudeau. How's he doing up there?

[00:21:34] **SC**: He's good. His hair and his beard are lush and –

[00:21:36] **BB**: It's keeping up. Okay. Even in these pandemic times.

[00:21:41] **SC**: Yeah. No, he's doing alright.

[00:21:43] **BB**: Okay. An emotion.

[00:21:45] **SC**: Joy.

[00:21:46] BB: Joy. Okay. Simon, here we go. When I think of the future of journalism, I feel sadness. The pitches I receive have gone from squishy to sleek. If I receive a pitch that starts with, "What's up, Internet, Simon," I start typing. When I write stories on plants, I get dramatic. My favorite pitches include colorways and a very specific that kicker if there is one. I normally take about 20 milliseconds to respond to emails. But if it's Justin Trudeau, I will respond even faster. If you do get a response back from me, you should know that I am very joyful for you.

[00:22:29] SC: Wow.

[00:22:29] BB: There you go. What do you think?

[00:22:31] SC: I love it, and so close to the truth.

[00:22:33] BB: It's kind of close. I think it is. I love that. I love that. Well, Simon, thank you so much. Thank you for telling me about colorways and a new drama on – Well, not a new drama. An old drama but still a fascinating Danish one.

[00:22:46] SC: An old one.

[00:22:48] BB: So good and books and all the things. This was fun. I really appreciate it.

[00:22:53] SC: Thank you so much, Beck. I had a good time too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:22:56] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with A Journalist, featuring Simon Cohen from Digital Trends. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. 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 to 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]