

EPISODE 74

[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.

Our guest on the show this week is Issie Lapowsky, a senior reporter for Protocol. Issie's coverage centers around the intersectionality of technology, politics and national affairs. Prior to joining Protocol, Issie was a senior writer for Wired, a contributor at CBS and reporter staff writer for Inc. Magazine. During today's episode, Issie starts by sharing more about the uniqueness of Protocol's coverage and outlet, who she gets the best stories and ideas from, how many follow-ups are acceptable and more. Let's jump in to the episode now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:09] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. We are 60 something episodes on. I'm Beck Bamberger, the host of this lovely podcast and run BAM, and I run OnePitch and we talk to journalist all the time, which is a lot of fun and always talk about what they're drinking, what they're maybe eating, what they've made in quarantine, all those great stuff.

Today, very exciting, from Protocol is Issie Lapowsky, a senior reporter who's covering all types of juicy topics. Issie, thank you for being here.

[00:01:40] IL: Thank you for having me.

[00:01:41] BB: Yeah. Issie, we heard you used to be at Wired, you used to be at CBS, you used to — you even used to be an adjunct professor. Okay.

[00:01:51] **IL:** That was fun because I was at NYU and I went to NYU, so it felt very full circle.

[00:01:57] **BB:** What did you teach?

[00:01:59] **IL:** I taught a course in the graduate school of publishing about the impact of Apple, Amazon, Facebook and Google on publishing.

[00:02:10] **BB:** Oh, fascinating! Oh, wow! That's cool to go back to your alma mater too.

[00:02:14] **IL:** Yeah. I know. It made me feel old though.

[00:02:16] **BB:** Yeah. It's okay. Yeah. I hear you. Well, first off for folks who are not as familiar with Protocol. Can you give us a run down on Protocol?

[00:02:27] **IL:** Sure. Protocol is a tech publication we launched last year. We are by the publisher of Politico, but a completely separate brand. We cover the people, power and politics of tech, which is sort of our tag line, but I would say, we're differentiated in that we are writing less so for a consumer audience and more so for a tech audience, of people who are working tech, regulating tech, studying tech. For that reason, we go really deep into a number of verticals, areas of coverage beat that or maybe thus covered. So we have a great team covering enterprise technology, we had really excellent team covering China. I think it's really interesting and differentiated. We a FinTech team and our policy team.

We have some great reporters covering labor and workplace issues, DEI. We have an excellent venture capital reporter and we're growing. If anybody hears this and knows somebody who's good to join us, here is my little plug, that we have a lot of jobs open, which is a great thing in media right now.

[00:03:40] **BB:** How refreshing to hear, "We're hiring. Hey! Anybody who's going on." Yes, Biz Carson is one of our favorites over at your team, that we've had on here before and all that good stuff, so yes. Okay. Issie, how is your inbox? How do you keep it organized?

[00:04:00] **IL:** Oh my God! I don't.

[00:04:02] BB: Wow!

[00:04:02] IL: I mean, yeah. I absolutely do not keep it organized. My inbox is a hot mess, and I am a mark-all-as-read person.

[00:04:11] BB: Me too.

[00:04:12] IL: But that's how I keep it not organized, but it's sort of out of sight, out of mind. That's how I get rid of the nasty notifications and just get on with my day. No, my inbox is not good. It's not a model for anybody out there to emulate.

[00:04:29] BB: There's very few that are, I feel. I've had so many people be like they're master leaders. Last week, I had a star system person, who like pink and red and all these types of stars. I was like, "Wow, that's a pretty elaborate one." Mass, just total put it in the delete, all the way. Like everyone has a different thing. Specifically for pitches, do you do any filing system of those or how do you handle pitches?

[00:04:56] IL: On my best days, I will flag things for follow up to remind myself to go back to them later. Sometimes I will not remember to even check my flagged messages for like a month, and then that's when I get — that's when — your listeners out there probably get an email from me saying, "I'm so sorry for the delay, but is this still something we can work on together?" Yeah, so I don't really have a filing system. I drive some of my tech reporter colleagues who are very into the productivity apps and whatnot. That's because I organize things, like I Slack myself, my story, my different reminders and my to-d list.

[00:05:34] BB: Interesting.

[00:05:34] IL: But it's not like fancy Slack tool. It's like literally, I just have a DM conversation myself, a very long one, where I go back and see some of the stuff that I wanted to remember, and like often not. Then yeah, I'm not very good about filing pitches away, but I do try to respond to them. As much as I mark all as read, I do try to skim all my inbox as these emails come in. If anything seems like remotely interesting, I try to follow up right away.

A big problem that I have is because I cover policy, I do have an inbox that fills up with just every press pool email from the White House. That's the stuff that I miss most often, is because I'm so used to most of it being background noise that doesn't really **[inaudible 00:06:27]** with my beath. Then every so often, there's a call that's about something very relevant to my beat, and I have to make sure to be on the lookout to catch those.

[00:06:39] BB: I haven't had a situation like this before, where we've had someone so tied to policies. Do you have kind of your like your newsletters that you go to that are like coming from the Fed, the White House, the Senate floor? Like I don't even know the newsletters for that. But is that something you do or have?

[00:06:56] IL: Yeah. I mean, it's not even newsletters. It's usually the press reps for lawmakers, so Chuck Schumer or just various lawmakers or committees. Committees where I cover their **[inaudible 00:07:08]** the Energy and Commerce Committee, the Judiciary Committee. Even within the executive branch, so you've got the White House, but then you've got the NSC, or the SEC, the FTC. You have to get on a lot of —

[00:07:24] BB: The EPA. I know that because I'm in a policy class right for my PhD. I was like, "Wow! There's a lot of stuff that's under the White House specifically, like the executive branch." I had no idea, like EPA and all of that.

[00:07:33] IL: Yeah. A lot of that stuff, yeah, like I said, it kind of becomes background noise because it often isn't something I need to report on, but sometimes it is. A lot of good pitches can get buried somehow under that sort of avalanche of just generic reports coming out of the government.

[00:07:54] BB: Yep. Okay. When you are thinking and contemplating, and looking at your Slack channel to yourself for instance on what you might consider. I'm noticing just from your coverage, you covered everything from what Facebook is doing on Trump, or what Google is committing to ad tech or the Senate passes billions, all the stuff. Like that's a big hot topic, I saw it got pass just recently. How do you think of doing a story? Does it hit you like, "Oh, I'm on my

walk with my dog” or “I’m in the shower” or “I’m just looking at my Slack channel”? Is there any inspiration funnel for you?

[00:08:31] IL: Yeah. I mean, it’s mostly talking to people. It’s mostly — that’s where I get my best stories, is talking to people who are in this line of work or studying it, or have some insider knowledge and I can report out a story that are telling me, hopefully for the first time. The best stories that I write and the best inspiration is when I’m just talking to people and they tell me something I don’t know, that I think that our readers don’t know. Then of course, there’s the new cycle. You mentioned the senate passed billions of dollars in the US Innovation and Competition Act. That is a multi-hundred-billion-dollar bill that is pouring money into science and technology. As a tech reporter, I have to cover that, so do all the other reports covering congress or **[inaudible 00:09:20]** in general the idea of some bipartisan progress happening in the country.

That’s just a big news story that affects my beat and then I need to cover. Sometimes it’s driven by the companies. Those are the times when Facebook has big announcement and they will pre-brief reporters or Facebook will make some change, and then I kind of have to synthesize that for our readers. Sometimes it’s the courts. I recently covered the Supreme Court decision on a big anti-hacking statute. Sometimes it is pitches. I do like to work with PR people who have a good sense of what I cover, and who have really useful sources for me to talk to. But I have to say, that pitches are I guess the hardest type of inspiration. Because as a reported and somebody who tries to do a lot of accountability reporting, I often am trying to find the stories that I’m not getting pitched on.

[00:10:21] BB: Yeah, exactly. Of course, as we know with pitching, there’s always an objective, which is like, “This is my client. Don’t you want to cover it?” So, yes, I hear you on that front. You’re speaking a little bit of like, “Okay. I get my story ideas from people and the conversations I’m having. Are you ever open to?” Because we get asked this a lot. Are you ever open to like, “Oh! Hey! I got someone that just might be of interest” or this person with this fancy title who like is a source, could be a resource. No pitch, no story to push. Just like, there are fancy title, someone person who used to be at the EPA that’s and on the committee of blah blah. Like is that interesting and compelling to you as an email or a pitch?

[00:11:01] IL: Yeah. It definitely is, but it has to come in the right way. Like I have people pitch me just a generic person to talk to and I don't know what I'm supposed to talk to them about. If this person at the EPA has specific thoughts on such and such new rule that just came out or has some kind of **[inaudible 00:11:23]** knowledge that they feel I need to cover. Like give me some sense of what they want to talk about. It doesn't have to be a fully-formed pitch, like, "Hey, a profile of my client who used to work at the EPA." But just, what does this person know that I need to know.

[00:11:37] BB: Exactly.

[00:11:38] IL: Generally, like I don't know. I find that conversations where somebody just comes in and wants to talk about trends, I don't go that for.

[00:11:49] BB: We'll have time for that, no.

[00:11:50] IL: Yeah. It's always, even if I don't respond to that pitch right away and say, "Yes, I want to talk to this person out of the blue about like, "Who knows what?" and maybe it will go somewhere. Even though I don't do that, I will return to it when I'm covering something that's relevant. For instance, I just wrote a story about the SEC has this new program on giving away money for broadband access to low-income Americans or people who lost their jobs during the pandemic. I was interested in writing about not just the fact that the program existed, which a lot of news was covering at the time, but probably, the implementation was rolling out, like how it was building.

I just look back in my inbox and found a great pitch that included a number of activist and community organizers, and people who are actually working to get people signed up for this. There were like a number of sources for me in there that I immediately went back to, and they kind of stated their case for why they thought — what they thought the next steps needed to be now that the program was out there. Just because I didn't respond to that pitch immediately, I did return —

[00:13:00] BB: You got it in your back pocket, yeah. I've heard so many people on here, they just use their inbox as their own Google. They'll go back in there and search that thing and they

find some pitch from four and half months ago, and they pull that thing up. Yep, it seems so basic. I can't tell you, that's probably dozens of people at this time that are like, "Is that all we have?" Just the search bar in your inbox of thousands of emails. But you know, hey, I guess effective so go with it. Well, that was insightful and very helpful. Key takeaway is, it's got to have the hook and the timing as to why you'd want to speak with them. Timing is of course a lot of this, because who knows if that senate decides like, "We're going to push this bill forward" that impact tech.

Actually, this tech legislation that came out just about, "Oh! We want to compete with China. Oh! We got bipartisan support." I didn't hear a damn thing about — you probably know, Issie. That was maybe coming about, but I'm like, "Wait a second!" I saw it on this BBC this morning, I'm like, "This was even in the works?" It seems very sudden to me. I could just imagine being a reporter and like, "Oh! Shoot! Okay, this is live."

[00:14:08] IL: Yeah. That's the one that I was talking about, that was the hundred s of billions dollars that is something we were following.

[00:14:15] BB: Yes, you were on that.

[00:14:16] IL: Yeah.

[00:14:17] BB: Yes.

[BREAK]

[00:14:20] 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]

[00:14:43] **BB:** Okay, Issie. I have a fill in the blank section here. Let's give you the phrase and you could fill it in with whatever you want. Usually insightful. My favorite sources always —

[00:14:56] **IL:** Tell me something that I don't know and that not a lot of people know.

[00:15:01] **BB:** There you go. The most annoying sources always —

[00:15:05] **IL:** Pitch me on stories I've just written.

[00:15:09] **BB:** Oh! Bad form. You'll get a response from me if —

[00:15:15] **IL:** Usually if I know you already — it's not very helpful but —

[00:15:19] **BB:** There you go. You'll never get a response from me if —

[00:15:24] **IL:** If you follow up too many times. It just pisses me off so much. I mean, or you will get the most annoyed angry response, because you would just be shocked to the number of people who I don't know who cold pitch me and then will follow up every day.

[00:15:38] **BB:** Ever day?

[00:15:38] **IL:** Oh! Yeah. I mean, it's wild.

[00:15:42] **BB:** I wonder if that's just a bot or something at this point. How many follow ups is too many by the way?

[00:15:46] **IL:** I think one is good.

[00:15:49] **BB:** Yes, that suffices. One and done. Okay. It would be a huge help if you —

[00:15:57] **IL:** If you didn't oversell what your client's story is. I recently had a pitch in my inbox, where the pitch were just so much more compelling than the actual story. I ended up building a

story sort of around it. But it made the interview a real struggle, because somebody had pitch me something that was really a lot more than what the true story was.

[00:16:24] BB: The best compliment I received about my work was —

[00:16:28] IL: That I'm tough but fair.

[00:16:30] BB: Oh! I like that. One thing I think people should know more about me is —

[00:16:36] IL: That I want to get the accurate story, so I think a lot of time, people come to a question that I ask in a very defensive pose, defensive crouch. I try to sort of obfuscate and I just want what the accurate story is.

[00:16:56] BB: The last best thing I ate or cook was —

[00:16:58] IL: Actually, last night I made a pretty good fish dish. I can't take too much credit for it, because it was HelloFresh, but it was **[inaudible 00:17:06]** if anybody is a HelloFresh subscriber.

[00:17:11] BB: You still cooked it, Issie.

[00:17:12] IL: I did.

[00:17:13] BB: You take that credit, yep. Quarantine has taught me —

[00:17:18] IL: To really value my work-life balance, because I have a toddler and trying to juggle the two at all times is a challenge, so you really need to be able to compartmentalize and set aside the time for each.

[00:17:31] BB: My perfect Sunday is —

[00:17:34] IL: This is also relevant to my toddler, but he for some reason loves the sounds of the trumpets on CBS Sunday Morning.

[00:17:43] BB: Really?

[00:17:43] IL: Yes. We have breakfast and then we gather in front of the TV for him to listen to the trumpets. He has no interest obviously in most of the stories in CBS Sunday Morning, but we do that. Then we go for like a long walk or maybe like out to lunch now that it's nice out.

[00:18:02] BB: I love that. That's nice. It's summer right now while we're recording, so it's actually nice and lovely out. Issie, what are you reading, consuming, watching? I mean, obviously listening to some trumpets, but what else do you got?

[00:18:17] IL: I am, let's see, I've been watching The Handmaid's Tale. Actually, I feel on a lot of the shows that only I watch and my husband doesn't because it's NBA Playoffs season, so —

[00:18:31] BB: Perfect, so you have your stuff.

[00:18:33] IL: So I have my time. Usually, we watch most things together. So I've been watching The Handmaid's Tale, Younger. I just finished The Challenge All Stars, which if you're not familiar is the evolution of Real World/Road Rules Challenge.

[00:18:49] BB: Oh wow!

[00:18:51] IL: They got all the OGs from like the '90s and the early 2000s. That was —

[00:18:56] BB: Oh wow!

[00:18:56] IL: — enjoyable to me.

[00:18:57] BB: Wow! Wait! The Challenge, I don't even know this and I'm an elder millennial. I'm behind.

[00:19:02] IL: The Challenge, yeah. I don't know if you ever watch Real World/Road Rules Challenge back in the day, but —

[00:19:08] BB: Oh God! Rarely, but it bring —

[00:19:10] IL: I am **[inaudible 00:19:10]** so this is an evolution of that and it was very exciting to —

[00:19:16] BB: Okay. Perfect. This is why we ask. We got to know. What about just as an aside since we're here. What does your baby like to watch or listen to, or like what's the latest kid favorite thing?

[00:19:29] IL: He is bizarrely obsessed with Hamilton —

[00:19:33] BB: What?

[00:19:33] IL: Yeah, I know. But I mean, I really love it. Because we were stuck in quarantine all the time —

[00:19:39] BB: The music is good.

[00:19:39] IL: Yeah, there's only so much kid music that I could listen to, so I started to play with Hamilton. Then the movie came out last year, and he just fell in love. Like —

[00:19:48] BB: Oh, I love it.

[00:19:49] IL: I guess he recognize some of the songs and just so he — just being able to see it on the stage, so that's like the one thing that if you put it on, he can watch the full thing straight through, which is not a typical two-year-old attention span. But other than that, he also does like kids stuff, like Daniel Tiger on PBS.

[00:20:07] BB: Yes. That's a favorite.

[00:20:09] IL: And he's really into books, he loves books.

[00:20:11] BB: That's great. Daniel the Tiger. I've heard of such persona, yes. Okay, Issie, what do you feel is the future of journalism looking like?

[00:20:22] IL: It's an interesting time to ask that because I think it's getting so fragmented that we're seeing so many great journalists to even start and do their own thing, which I think is like a very appealing concept, it's also a very scary concept. Because you lose editors, and lawyers and you lose like a lot of the armor that you get in a larger news organization. You lose the big sort of investigative departments, which exists in a lot of news organizations.

I think there are upsides and downsides, and I think we will see how much people are willing to pay for individual subscriptions over time. I mean, I've signed up for a number of them. I've kind of always been somebody who — I do the thing people ask me to, like I contribute to the GoFundMe or I'd buy the Kickstarter. If these are people I know and —

[00:21:17] BB: Yeah, Substack.

[00:21:18] IL: If they ask me to do something like that because I would want the same. Now that people are splitting off and doing Substack, subscribing and I feel like, "Wow! I'm really hitting a high number of these things that I'm paying for" because when you're just subscribing to one, it doesn't feel like a lot to spend money on. I really believe in spending money on journalism, like I buy — if I find them hitting **[inaudible 00:21:43]** that pay well a lot, then I figure out that it's worth something to me and I should subscribe to it. But yeah, the subscriptions do add up.

[00:21:51] BB: Yeah. I've thought about that. That's a topic a couple of people are trying to crack, but how do you get all access pass and just call it like, "Hey! Just for \$499, you know what, a month." But that would be a lot actually, I just threw out that number and I'm like, "Shit! That's quite a lot. I don't know."

[00:22:08] IL: Yeah, and it raises questions about access to information.

[00:22:14] BB: Yeah, a recurring thing.

[00:22:16] IL: I think we need none paywalls content. We'll probably not going to get that outside of a big news organization. Even those are often putting up paywalls, which I understand too.

[00:22:28] BB: Yes, it is an interesting evolving time. Maybe you could do another class there for your alma mater.

[00:22:34] IL: I know, yeah.

[00:22:35] BB: They should call you back up. Well, Issie, now to my favorite part which is our mad libs. I'll give you the phrase, and I'll fill it in and then I will read you back the whole thing. Sometimes they're just silly, and sometimes they're very accurate. It runs a spectrum for sure. Okay. First thing is, what is a catch, just any catch phrase? Like, "Just do it."

[00:22:59] IL: How are you doing?

[00:23:01] BB: How you doing?

[00:23:02] IL: I just watched the FRIENDS Reunion so —

[00:23:05] BB: Was it good, by the way? I did not. Was it good or cheeseball?

[00:23:09] IL: It was pretty delightful but I'm a super fan. There were aspects of it that were like, I would have really been amused to see them do a whole new episode. It was more of a retrospective, but I really enjoyed it.

[00:23:22] BB: That's what I heard. I was like, "No, I want an episode." Like, "Now, where are we." Okay. That's a whole other topic, a whole other podcast. Okay. All right. What's a journalist scare phrase that you never want to hear?

[00:23:35] IL: Correction.

[00:23:36] **BB**: Oh! Yeah, yeah. That's a good one. Okay. What about an empowering buzz word that you'd hear in journalism?

[00:23:45] **IL**: Accountability.

[00:23:47] **BB**: Accountability, yes. This is our mad lib. We updated it, but I love it anyway. Okay. What about an adjective?

[00:23:57] **IL**: Circular.

[00:23:58] **BB**: Circular. What about a part of a pitch?

[00:24:02] **IL**: Salutation.

[00:24:03] **BB**: Got it. Okay. Another adjective.

[00:24:07] **IL**: Corporate.

[00:24:09] **BB**: Corporate. A part of a pitch.

[00:24:12] **IL**: Client's name.

[00:24:14] **BB**: That's cool. That works. An amount of time.

[00:24:17] **IL**: 525,600 minutes.

[00:24:21] **BB**: Oh! Wait a second. Okay. Wait! We'll just round it up to like 500,000, because I totally forgot that song.

[00:24:28] **IL**: [inaudible 00:24:29]

[00:24:30] **BB**: I know. Now, I got to like sing the whole thing. Okay. Are you going to sick it for me? Maybe we do that.

[00:24:35] **IL**: Okay. Sure.

[00:24:36] **BB**: Okay. Go ahead. Go ahead. I'm ready.

[00:24:38] **IL**: 525,600 minutes.

[00:24:43] **BB**: Oh my gosh! That was great. No one's ever sang on this, Issie.

[00:24:48] **IL**: Great! First time for everything.

[00:24:49] **BB**: I love it. Wow! Okay. No one's ever given that answer before by the way. Fantastic. Okay. What's another adjective?

[00:24:57] **IL**: Fuzzy.

[00:24:59] **BB**: Fuzzy. Singular noun.

[00:25:01] **IL**: Candle.

[00:25:02] **BB**: Candle. Okay. Almost done. A topic?

[00:25:06] **IL**: Climate change.

[00:25:07] **BB**: Climate change. Then a verb that ends in ing ideally.

[00:25:13] **IL**: Typing.

[00:25:14] **BB**: Typing. And then another verb. That's it.

[00:25:16] **IL**: Swinging.

[00:25:17] BB: Swinging. Okay. Well, that was swing. Okay. Here we go, Issie. To me, tech journalism is how you doing. It consists of corrections and accountability on the daily. If a pitch has a circular salutation, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a corporate client, you can expect no reply from me. In 525,600 minutes goes by and you do not see an email back from me, you can assume I am not fuzzy about it. The best stories always have candles and are usually about climate change. The best way to reach me is by typing to me, but you can also swing it over to me.

[00:25:57] IL: Okay. There we go.

[00:25:59] BB: I like this one.

[00:26:02] IL: I do respond to emails about corporate clients. I do have the issue **[inaudible 00:26:05]** about that.

[00:26:07] BB: Okay.

[00:26:08] IL: As a tech reporter, yeah, I would be pretty —

[00:26:11] BB: That is required. Okay, perfect. Slight correction on that front. Issie, this was so lovely. I love the recommendations. I love the singing. We got to learn so much about you. We learned about your inbox, it's crazy but you still search in there, so I love it.

[00:26:28] IL: Great. Well, thank you so much for doing this. It was very nice to talk to you.

[00:26:32] BB: Yes, this was great. Thanks so much, Issie. We will be reading on policy, keeping up real fast on your stuff.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:26:46] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Issie Lapowsky from Protocol. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If

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[END]