

EPISODE 98

[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 includes some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, business news, and beauty and wellness. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like, and how they connect with sources. Check out our new video series featuring guests for the podcast, including today's guests. Head to onepitch.co and look for the video page to learn more.

Today on the podcast, we sit down with Caroline O'Donovan, a reporter on the Inequality Team at BuzzFeed News. Caroline focuses on labor and the human condition. She's been with the outlets since 2015, and was previously a reporter and staff writer at The Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University. During the episode, Caroline tells us more about how she approaches her stories, sheds light on the labor environment which she has uncovered through her reporting, her favorite kinds of stories to write, and lots more. Let's hear from Caroline now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:22] BB: Welcome everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. And lo and behold, two people are drinking coffee on this show today. This is an exciting moment. I'm Beck Bamberger. I run an agency named BAM. We work with all venture-backed technology companies. And I'm also the creator along with Jared, who you guys all know, of OnePitch, which helps pitches get to the correct journalists and not clog up their inboxes, which is what we talk about on this show.

So with us today, very exciting. I'm very excited. Straight from San Francisco, also drinking coffee, Caroline O'Donovan. Did I get that right, Caroline?

[00:01:56] CO: Caroline O'Donovan.

[00:01:58] BB: O'Donovan. Ooh, reporter on the Inequality Team for BuzzFeed News. Super excited to have you. Welcome.

[00:02:05] CO: Hi. How is it going?

[00:02:07] BB: Pretty good. What kind of coffee you're drinking?

[00:02:10] CO: Oh, we have a slight addiction to this company called Craft Coffee that sends boxes of beans to your house. I actually got it as a gift for my husband six years ago when we first started dating, because you can tell them what kind of coffee profiles you like, and they ship your new stuff. And we actually just got married in October, and we're still using it.

[00:02:30] BB: Congrats. Congrats. And that's still a gift that keeps giving.

[00:02:34] CO: Yeah, exactly.

[00:02:35] BB: Oh, I love it. Well, that's great. I'm drinking a latte here from this little coffee place I go to across the street, and I love it. And they put it in my now glass mug. So they're super sustainable. You don't have to get the paper thing. Anyway. Okay. Let's talk about your focus of work, Caroline. I know, recently-ish, you used to be on the technology team. That has changed. Tell us a little bit about what the Inequality Team at BuzzFeed News is covering and focused on.

[00:03:04] CO: Absolutely. So it is what it sounds like. Obviously, we're living in a time of nearly unprecedented economic inequality. There's no shortage of stories for us to cover. But we're trying to really break through and make an impact around issues of race, around issues of gender, around issues of economic disparity. I, obviously, still work closely with the tech team at BuzzFeed, which you should check out. They just hired a whole slew of new people.

[00:03:31] BB: They have.

[00:03:31] CO: So it's super exciting. And I love all of them. But when I came to BuzzFeed – Gosh, six, seven years ago now almost, it was to cover workers' issues and labor in the

technology industry. And I still do the same thing. So I'm doing it for the Inequality Team now. And who knows that when I started out, that meant covering the gig economy, covering Google, covering Amazon. I think what I'm really interested in now is kind of seeing how the trends that some of those companies started in terms of whether it's like algorithmic management, or whether it's gig work. How is that impacting legacy industries? So where's that happening? Maybe in government or in other industries, where you wouldn't necessarily expect to see it. But I still basically do the same thing I was hired to do six years ago, like to talk to workers and think about how technology and venture capital and all of that is changing the way that people do their jobs.

[00:04:29] BB: Given that, and that's a specific focus, is your inbox crazy with pitches?

[00:04:34] CO: You know, when I started out, my inbox was a lot crazier. I think that as I've kind of buckled down to a more investigative style of reporting, the pitches have somewhat slowed, but I still get the pitches that are like on the new cycle and stuff like that. You publish a big investigation, like I just did about this edtech company. And you get your pitches that are about other edtech companies that people promise you do not have the problems of the company that you just wrote about, that kind of thing. And there's your fair share of newsletters and other things that drift across the transom. I have to be honest, like I don't – I'm not the most fastidious email checker anymore. I'm actually just thinking about this.

[00:05:15] BB: Really?

[00:05:16] CO: Yeah. I was thinking today.

[00:05:18] BB: This is the first time I've heard this in 100 episodes. Seriously, what do you mean? Do you check it like twice a day?

[00:05:26] CO: I think that when I first started at BuzzFeed, it was really easy to become overwhelmed like thinking that you were supposed to read and respond to every single inbound pitch and stuff like that. And actually, this is so dorky, but I went to like a workplace time management training. It was like one hour. And I've thought about it ever since. Which is like people – If you are feeling overwhelmed, think of one thing you're going to do a day and one

thing you're going to do a week and try to do that thing. And you might not be able to get to all the other things. And it really changed my perspective on stuff like responding to every piece of correspondence and stuff like that. I mean, obviously, I have to look at all my emails every day, right? Because you get responses to public records requests, and you get tips. You're in correspondence with –

[00:06:14] BB: Yeah. Yeah. **[inaudible 00:06:16].**

[00:06:17] CO: Yeah. And with like the people that you're writing about, right? You obviously have a responsibility to respond to them and engage with them and all that stuff. But I try not to get like bogged down by it too much anymore.

[00:06:28] BB: Got it. And so you seem like you have just kind of a Zen appeal to it, relationship.

[00:06:32] CO: Yeah. I don't know if everyone I've ever worked with would describe me as Zen. But I'll take it.

[00:06:36] BB: Okay. Okay. So I'm sure this answer is going to be a bit different. I often will ask, where do you get your story ideas? Are you taking a walk? Are you getting it from a pitch? What is the likelihood of a pitch? Yours is more investigative? So where do you get the genesis of the stories you do?

[00:06:57] CO: Sure. I mean, I think it's all – I mean, everyone's following the news cycle to a certain extent no matter what, right? So like I think that pitches and knowing what people are talking about and where the interest is, like there's always going to be value in that just as kind of a way to see what's going on out there.

I mean, where do I get story ideas? I think that, obviously, every journalist's dream story idea is a tip from a source, right? It's that email that's just like – Like someone emailed me yesterday. I genuinely have no idea who this person is. And I don't know if they'll ever respond to me again. But I got an email from this sort of like anonymous email address that was like, "Hi, I'm a worker. I'm having issues in my workplace. And I thought you might be the person I wanted to talk to

about that.” Like, “Boom!” That's the dream, right? Because I don't know what the company is going to be. I don't know what the problem is going to be. But my interest is definitely piqued by that.

[00:07:44] BB: Oh, yeah. Mmm, mmm, interesting. Okay.

[00:07:48] CO: Yeah. The same as with once you develop a reputation around a certain topic, and I think this is one benefit of having the same beat for so long, is like people know to go to you, right? People kind of know what you're going to be interested in and looking for.

[00:08:03] BB: Mm-hmm. So then, at this point, if you're getting those submitted to you and kind of people are knowing you more and more for that type of coverage, then are you then sourcing a lot of those tips and those insights from, perhaps, your inbox? Something as juicy as like that employee that wrote in? Is that happening a lot?

[00:08:24] CO: I mean, I don't think it's like happening to me every single day, right? I'm sure that there are people out there who are – There are journalists even on my beat who I think publish more frequently. And so I assume that they're probably getting a lot more inbound. BuzzFeed News also has a tip line. We try to put that into every story, right? So that's a system by which someone writes into BuzzFeed in general. And then my colleagues who are in charge of the tip line for the day, or the week, or whatever, will forward those tips that way. So it's definitely – There's a reason that journalists put their email addresses and numbers and their Twitter bios, right? Like it's not a job where you're hiding from the public, right? You want to be open and available.

[00:09:01] BB: It's so funny too. I will hear from people, like founders, like, “Well, how do you find their information? Or where do you get it?” And it's like, “Well, it's pretty out there usually for the most part.”

Yes. Okay. One little area that we have here is a fill in the blank. So I will give you the phrase, Caroline, and then you fill in the blank. If that sounds good.

[00:09:21] CO: Cool.

[00:09:22] **BB:** Let's do it. My favorite sources always –

[00:09:25] **CO:** My favorite sources always download Signal, which is an encrypted app where I feel safe talking to them and makes me feel like I'm responsible and we can communicate clearly and often.

[00:09:39] **BB:** Oh, okay. So this is preferred to everything else, text message, or emails, or anything?

[00:09:44] **CO:** Yep.

[00:09:45] **BB:** Yep. Okay. Tip for everybody, gets Signal. Good. The most annoying sources always –

[00:09:53] **CO:** The most annoying sources don't know I live on Pacific Time and call me at 6am because they think it's 9am, which is annoying.

[00:10:05] **BB:** Oh, no. On your cellphone? How are they calling you?

[00:10:08] **CO:** I mean, that's what we were just talking about, right?

[00:10:10] **BB:** The Signal. Yeah.

[00:10:12] **CO:** What is it? Call me, beat me if you want to reach me. Like it's all out there. I want you to contact me, but I also want to sleep to like at least 7:30.

[00:10:21] **BB:** Yeah, yeah. You'll get a response from me if –

[00:10:25] **CO:** I don't know. If you're funny, I think.

[00:10:28] **BB:** Oh, funny. Using humor in like a pitch? Seriously?

[00:10:31] **CO:** Yeah. But it has to be like actually funny.

[00:10:33] **BB:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:10:35] **CO:** Or just like being candid. Like there's a lot of pitches that's are just easy to look to kind of go numb to or kind of skip over. But if someone's using their real, genuine voice and really seems to be like reading what you actually do. Just be more human, I think.

[00:10:51] **BB:** Yeah, yeah. Okay. You will never get a response from me if –

[00:10:56] **CO:** I don't know. If it says Dogecoin.

[00:11:00] **BB:** Oh, God. Yeah, not the pitch for you. Okay. You can follow up with me if –

[00:11:07] **CO:** What does that mean? They can follow up with me like –

[00:11:09] **BB:** Oh, some people saw like follow-up with me once. And then some people are like never ever.

[00:11:14] **CO:** Oh, this is what I think about that. I wrote a story a couple of years ago about a company called Ziosk. Which is like I don't know if you've been to like a Chili's, or an Olive Garden, or that kind of chain restaurant in the last five years. But they make the software that goes on the tablets that are on the table. And you can kind of –

[00:11:33] **BB:** Oh, yeah. Which I always thought was gross.

[00:11:35] **CO:** Order, gross, like icky germs. Because it's like sticky-icky, like a ketchup bottle.

[00:11:41] **BB:** Yes, exactly. It's the new ketchup bottle. Exactly.

[00:11:46] **BB:** Yeah. But so at the end of those things, if you process your payment on there, it'll often ask you to quickly – We're constantly inundated by surveys, right? Like, “Will you just

really quickly review your experience at this TGI Fridays, or whatever.” I actually don't know if TGI Fridays uses this. But it's just an example.

Even at CVS now, when I finish at the pharmacy at CVS, they're like, “Oh, by the way, at the bottom of this receipt is a QR code. Could you scan it?”

[00:12:08] BB: Oh, yes. \$5, you'll say.

[00:12:10] CO: Review me. And I went, “How do you –” But the thing about that is, is that those people, unbeknownst to us, the reason that they are often pushing on you is because their workplace performance is being quantified by those surveys very frequently. So the CVS person, the server at the at Darden-owned restaurant or whatever, they actually can be influenced like financially, economically, by what you're saying in those surveys about them.

[00:12:37] BB: Oh. Gosh. It was so unfair. Go ahead.

[00:12:40] CO: Yeah, you'd get like a smaller section or a schedule if you're getting really bad ratings, or if you're just not asking enough, if you're not getting enough ratings. And I've chatted here and there with the folks at CVS, and it's a similar thing. Like, “Yeah, I'll get in trouble, be on rocky ground if you don't help me out and do the survey at work.” I don't know if everyone has a similar like help IT situation, right? But even at my own job internally at BuzzFeed, when I communicate with an IT person like I have a problem, there's internal software that asks me to rate my experience with them. And I've asked them too, like – They said it's not so bad that they're not being like influenced by it too much in terms of their performance reviews and all that. But we definitely live in a society where people are – Their work is being quantified, and there are metrics that you as a person might not realize that they're being adjudicated on, right?

So when I see a PR person who has emailed me essentially the exact same thing four times in a row, I don't usually tend to think like, “Oh, my God, you're so annoying. Leave me alone.” I'm really busy.” I tend to think like, “Oh, I wonder what is happening at this person's place of work that they're being asked to do this like over and over and over again,” because I think we all somewhat know –

[00:13:54] BB: What an interesting perspective.

[00:13:56] CO: It's like if you were dating and someone's like texting you again and again. Like we all know it's not cute. It almost has this air of desperation in it at that I'm wondering like what the actual goal is. And I don't know. Maybe you would know this better than I because it's your industry. But like is this a world in which someone is being reviewed by like how many journalists are responding to you? Or how many are opening the email and stuff like that.

[00:14:20] BB: Yeah. There can be, I'd say, pressure down the chain, down to the junior level of like, "Did you do your follow-ups? Did you do your follow-ups?" And that person has 17 things they're trying to do today and they're like, "Yeah, I did it. Yeah, I send it." And just to check it off. I feel like that's a lot of what happens from people I hear otherwise who were just like, "Well, it's just a lot of like, "Go, go, go." Just get it done." So I almost feel like you're just a checkbox. You're one of the 39 people they are like to follow up with. And then it's like, "Oh, yeah," and it's a numbers game. Yeah, it's bad. It's bad out there.

Interesting perspective, though. It reminds me of that black mirror episode.

[00:14:58] CO: 100%, yeah.

[00:15:00] BB: Right? Yeah, but then it's only personal and it's just like upgrading you or whatever. But yeah, damn. Damn. Okay, great response to that one. That was definitely distinct. Okay.

[00:15:13] BB: The best compliment I received about my work was –

[00:15:17] CO: Oh, this is so easy. I mean, there's so many accolades. There're so many tweets. There're so many things that we shoot for. But hands down, and this is also so cheesy, but it's like when you get an email from a worker, or a parent, or something, a stakeholder in your story, who just says, like, "I didn't think anyone would ever hear me out. I didn't think anyone would ever see me. And like what you wrote encapsulates my experience and really makes me feel like I have a valid perspective and that what I'm going through is real." When you

read that and when you know that you've done that for someone, it's just like incredibly meaningful.

Like I wrote a story at the beginning of this year about these kids in Baltimore who were fighting Comcast, because their parents couldn't afford expensive kind of high-bandwidth internet connections. And Comcast has a very deeply discounted program. And the kids were basically saying like that's great that there's cheap Wi-Fi. But it doesn't actually support all the Zooms that we need to do for school. Like if you have multiple Zoom meetings in the house and you're all trying to use it. And Comcast is saying, "Yes, it does. Yes, it does. It's fast enough." And they were saying like it's not that. On paper, you can say a thousand things. But I'm telling you that like when my sister is on her first period class, and then I try to log on to mine, like nothing works. And then I miss – Two minutes of someone explaining calculus to you like it could be the difference between you ever understanding calculus and not understanding it.

[00:16:44] BB: Yes. Yes. So what did they do?

[00:16:46] CO: Well, I mean, I'm not going to say that my story like drove an entire business decision on Comcast. But they upped the bandwidth of the cheaper program. And so corresponding with those kids after who truly were like teenagers and –

[00:17:02] BB: That's awesome. And they'll probably always remember that forever.

[00:17:05] CO: I would hope that that experience, the work that they did and pushing and then getting someone in the press to kind of shine a light on that and then getting an outcome from this massive company, right?

[00:17:16] BB: Yes.

[00:17:17] CO: I would hope that that kind of makes them feel validated for the rest of their lives. And it's like, "Okay, I have power. Now, what can I do with it?"

[00:17:27] BB: I love that. Because then as a teenager, you're going to have this great example of that time I told a media person of this situation and something was done and change actually

happened. Wow! Functioning democracy of sorts, and free media. So many stories of what that trickles down to for someone. It's powerful. Oh, I love that. I love. They're probably talking about you right now in their college class or something.

[00:17:50] CO: Hopefully they're talking about something fun or something.

[00:17:52] BB: Oh, hopefully. But they're always going to remember that. I think that's great. Okay, okay. Well, maybe this ties to this. My favorite stories to write are –

[00:18:00] CO: Oh, my favorite stories to write? I don't know. I think I would say that stories that kind of shift the reader's perspective a little bit or open up their mind. So maybe a little bit like the Ziosk story I was describing before. An object that you might see all the time, and you kind of know it's there, but you haven't thought about its implications. Or the story that I most recently wrote about this, like educational software company that is absolutely massive, and so many kids are using it. And there are a lot of very legitimate complaints about it. And it's like, "Okay, what's happening to the students and all of that?" But also, what does this mean for our education system? Like what is the relationship that we want public education to have with private vendors? And what is our responsibility to students? And how is like private equity back software companies kind of profiting off of what is, I think we all know, a very weakened educational system.

[00:18:56] BB: Yep.

[00:18:58] CO: So I think my favorite kind of stories to write is like when you're trying to kind of expand the world consciousness of the readers' mind. Not just like – You could do an easy second base hit story, right? Like Elon Musk promised frozen yogurt to workers who want a union. That's like, "Yeah, Elon Musk, he's **[inaudible 00:19:16]**. He's super rich, da-da-da-da-da."

[00:19:19] BB: Yeah, exactly. Oh, that's good. Okay.

[BREAK]

[00:19:24] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways one pitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to onepitch.co learn about our new OnePitch score and see how easy it is to find the right journalists to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:19:48] BB: My favorite Sunday, or perfect Sunday, is –

[00:19:53] CO: I don't think – I mean, I live in Northern California. So I don't think you can go wrong with like getting up, reading the paper, having some coffee, going on a hike, grabbing some beers. That's probably my favorite. My favorite. Some sort of physical exertion followed by almost immediate reward in a beautiful place.

[00:20:14] BB: Yes. Oh, exactly. What do you read?

[00:20:18] CO: I read The New Yorker. I read the New York Times.

[00:20:21] BB: New York Times Sunday editions. Yup. Got to get that.

[00:20:24] CO: Yeah, we're weekenders. I've been a lifelong reader of the New York Times Sunday magazine, which might interest to the world to know that on the West Coast, it comes on Sunday. On the East Coast, it comes on Saturday. You have twice the time to get through it.

[00:20:39] BB: Doesn't it just marvel you how – I look at that and like, "How is that produced at that frequency?" I don't understand. I don't understand. I mean, obviously, hundreds and thousands of people work in New York Times. But, wow. Wow! It's impressive.

[00:20:54] CO: Thousands and thousands of people with union protected jobs, which hopefully folks at Wirecutter and other parts of the company will soon be a part of as well.

[00:21:04] BB: There you go. There you go.

[00:21:07] CO: So there's stuff that I read like that that's like whatever's on the latest thing on long form a, Yarn, Texas Monthly. High Country News is something I've been like looking on a lot lightly.

[00:21:16] BB: Wait, wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait. Texas Monthly?

[00:21:19] CO: Yeah, because they have such beautiful narrative feature writing.

[00:21:23] BB: Really? Texas Monthly? Okay. Never heard that referenced ever. Wow! Okay.

[00:21:30] CO: That's what I read for fun. But the Left Press online has really been experiencing a resurgence too. So like Labor Notes has just been hiring a bunch of people who do a lot of obviously opinionated, but like **[inaudible 00:21:43]** reporting and coverage of everything that's going on with workers in America. As that kind of world of writing online has exploded, that's like a super helpful resource, right? Because there are people who are just keeping track of everyone who's on strike, and everyone who's trying to unionize and all that kind of trend and stuff. So that's where my attention goes to.

[00:22:07] BB: Okay. My favorite hobby is –

[00:22:09] CO: Oh! I mean, they say, “Never turn your hobbies into your job,” but I think that the only hobby I've ever really had is this.

[00:22:17] BB: Really? I love that though. Is it still fun? Do you still write for fun?

[00:22:22] CO: Sometimes? Yeah, it's definitely still fun sometimes. Sometimes it's a job. But I enjoy writing. I mean, like four years ago, pre-COVID, pre-quarantine, I love going to estate sales. That's not really a hobby, but I do love going to estate sales. And I bought this like child's weaving loom for \$6, like learn how to weave. And so that was like five bucks, right? Then I went to a yarn store and accidentally spent like \$120 on this really expensive yarn, because I had no idea what that kind of stuff could cost. And then you're at the register and they tell you the price, and I'm too chicken to be like, “Never mind. This is a new hobby. I didn't mean to

commit to this.” What do you think I have right now? I have a child's loom that has like the basic framing on it, and then nothing else that I have owned ever since then. And I made it through all of quarantine. And I still do not know how to weave. So I don't really think that like hobbies are my thing, per se.

[00:23:16] BB: Yeah. That's okay. Stick to writing. That's okay. Okay. The last song I listened to was –

[00:23:25] CO: Ooh, the last song I listened to was – I have no idea. I like the Berkeley Jazz station. I've been listening to a lot of Vashti Bunyan. And a very good friend of mine is completely addicted to the song Material Girl by Saucy Santana. And so I listened to that like three times in a row in the car the other day. So that's a wide range.

[00:23:53] BB: Mm-hmm. That is wide. Ooh, I love when you get so into a song, you want to play it multiple times. Something very satisfying about that. Okay, we're going to skip the Thanksgiving question, because it's already past Thanksgiving. During the holidays I most look forward to –

[00:24:09] CO: I don't know. I guess, like, I think that even though the culture right now is increasingly like self-care, take your PTO. And BuzzFeed is very – They give us a lot of time. They don't give it to us. I mean, we negotiate for our PTO. But there's been a lot of encouragement for your mental health. If you need to take a day, you should, and all this kind of stuff. But even though we're kind of living in a moment where everyone is talking about that, like not talking about not burning out and that kind of thing. I think that there's – I've seen memes on TikTok that are like the gist of the joke is that that's good for everyone else, but not for myself. Like I want everyone else to have time off. And I want everyone else to do self-care. And I think it's everyone's right to just peacefully be unproductive and vibe. But for me, no. For me, I actually have to be productive all the time. And I think that that's really true, right? It's like I write about labor issues because I care about that, and I want everyone to get equitable and fair treatment, and blah, blah, blah, blah. But then it can still be hard to totally un-sync your mind from the world of work and from wanting to like be busy. And even if I'm not working, like maybe I'll go home and garden and accomplish a task, right? And I think we're super raised and trained

to think that way. And so I think that actually one nice thing about the holidays is that everyone is collectively taking time off and relaxing at the same time.

[00:25:29] BB: That is the key part. That is the key part.

[00:25:32] CO: It helps. You know what I mean? It helps.

[00:25:33] BB: It really helps. Because, just frankly, when you like go on a vacation randomly in August or something, the whole world is not on – Or at least the whole country or whatever is not on the same page. So you're still getting way behind. And then it's not fun. I totally get that. Very much agree. Quarantine has taught me –

[00:25:54] CO: Quarantine has taught me that there's a certain aspect of office life and commuting and city life that was giving me a lot of energy and purpose in a way that I wasn't aware of. I think I definitely fall into that class of people who, prior, always thought that the dream would be to buy like a little cottage by a river, or a ranch in Sierra foothills, and just be kind of like out there on my own with my husband, with my family, whatever, and in beauty, and writing, and da-da-da-da.” And I think it's a good thing that I never got the opportunity, because now I know that what I really need – And need to thrive, necessarily. But there definitely was something that I still am figuring out what it was. There's definitely something I was getting off of like being in a space with my coworkers, going to that space, not every day, but a few times a week. Being out in the world, being forced to go out in the world that shapes your thoughts and like shapes your confidence and makes you kind of feel like you exist. And I didn't realize that a life of exclusively working from home would like rob me of that a certain level of energy. That surprised me.

[00:27:15] BB: Oh, these answers, so distinct. I love this. Let's keep it going. What are you – We'll take reading, listening to, Audible books, dancing to, whatever your fancy is, but we like to get where you're getting all your stories right now. So what would you say?

[00:27:33] CO: Like media that I consume?

[00:27:36] BB: Yeah, media consume. Where else do you get your stories that you love?

[00:27:37] **CO:** Oh, I exclusively watch TikTok for one hour a day. So that's [inaudible 00:27:41].

[00:27:41] **BB:** Oh! You have a one-hour – Like, precisely, do you time yourself?

[00:27:45] **CO:** I have to have a cut off.

[00:27:47] **BB:** My God. That's discipline.

[00:27:51] **CO:** Yeah, I get a little alert every single day from my phone, “Five minutes left of TikTok.”

[00:27:56] **BB:** Oh, wow! Is that like a child parameter thing that you put on yourself?

[00:28:00] **CO:** Yeah, I am my own baby.

[00:28:01] **BB:** Oh, God! That's discipline. I like that. Now, how do you arrive to one hour? It satisfies you enough?

[00:28:09] **CO:** No, it doesn't, constantly. Because you can cheat. And I'm constantly like, “15 more minutes –” Do you know that if you hit 15 more minutes enough times, it will just stop offering it to you? Like it gives up on you for the day. And it's like you obviously have a problem. Like let's try again tomorrow.

[00:28:24] **BB:** Oh my God? Really? I did not. Wow! Wow! Okay. Okay. So besides TikTok, okay, what else? Do you have a book? Do you have a show? Do you have anything?

[00:28:36] **CO:** Oh, I've always got something. I'm reading a book by Isabel Allende right now. We went on our honeymoon in Mexico. So I downloaded a bunch of novels. It's the House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende.

[00:28:53] **CO:** House of the Spirits.

[00:28:53] **CO**: I have a book on my nightstand that is called – I think it's Letters to my Mexican Father. Actually, it's by a man lived in the – Lives, live, lives in the Bay Area. And obviously, he's Mexican-American. And so he's talking about the relationship a lot between California and Mexico. So that was –

[00:29:13] **BB**: Wait, wait, wait. Letters to my Mexican Father?

[00:29:16] **CO**: Yeah, I think so.

[00:29:17] **BB**: Actually, I've seen it, at least on Audible.

[00:29:21] **CO**: Letters from my Mexican Father. I don't know.

[00:29:25] **BB**: An argument with my Mexican Father?

[00:29:27] **CO**: Yeah. But then there's one that's definitely like a letter. But that's the author. That is the one.

[00:29:33] **BB**: Okay, okay, okay.

[00:29:34] **CO**: It's the same guy. And yeah, we listen to the Audible version of the book about the Sackler family. What is that called?

[00:29:46] **BB**: Ooh, I'm not familiar with that. Sackler, let's see.

[00:29:50] **CO**: Empire of Pain. I was going to say House of Pain. I don't want to get the other one wrong. Yes.

[00:29:55] **BB**: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. For all the drugs that they sold the people. Okay. Ooh! Ooh! On NPR? Who runs that?

[00:30:05] **CO**: That is a book about Patrick Radden Keefe that we listened to.

[00:30:09] **BB:** Oh, gotcha. There's been quite a lot of coverage on that. That's about all the opioid lawsuits. And horribleness.

[00:30:14] **CO:** Yeah, I mean, it's just an incredible book and like really helps you, I think, as a reporter, like think through sourcing and tactics and that kind of thing while you're listening to it. So I actually love it.

[00:30:27] **BB:** Good recommendations. Let's keep going here. What do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:30:34] **CO:** It's funny, because I saw this question. I knew we're going to talk about this question. And this kind of used to be my job a little bit. In the years when I was working at Nieman Lab, that was kind of our main question, like, "What is the future of the business of this industry? What is the future of how the news is going to be delivered to people? What problems does that pose?" Blah, blah, blah. So I used to think about it all the time. And the longer I've been at BuzzFeed, sort of like the more I've gotten away from the conversation on that. So I don't know. I mean, I think, obviously, if it was easy to know the answer to it, like seven years later, I probably would have a better answer for you.

I mean, I can tell you what I hope will be facets of the future of media. I mean, I think we've seen a lot of really talented people like step away from creating free mass media and working on like newsletters and smaller individualized projects where you have more of like a niche fractured audience that you're writing to and for. I totally understand both financially and intellectually why that would be attractive. But I almost – Actually, yeah, my entire career, I've never worked for anywhere that had a paywall. I've never worked for anywhere that wasn't completely available to all readers. And while I hope and think that everyone should pay for good journalism, and obviously, I mean, that's an incredibly important tenant to like how the industry is going to survive. I desperately hope that the people high in the towers or whatever are working on a way for us to continue to have free, non-paywalls news that is smart and speaks to people like candidly and directly. Because I think that's actually what drew me to working at BuzzFeed six years ago, is like this is something where you can really reach people, on like a lot of people with what you want to say. And so I don't personally subscribe to or read very many newsletters.

And I think it's like a – There's so much content that is siloed right now. So many newsletters you can subscribe to and pay for, and so many podcasts you can subscribe to and pay for, that it's like a little

Daunting, I guess?

[00:32:47] BB: It is. It's inundating.

[00:32:49] CO: And I understand that there is – I don't know. It's a confusing moment for figuring out how people get their news. But for me, I just think I'm always more excited and interested in focusing on the stuff that is like reaching a lot of people versus –

[00:33:07] BB: The few that can pay. Yeah.

[00:33:10] CO: Yeah. And speaking to the people who you already sort of know, but they think. Because I think it does create a weird feedback cycle when you're writing and reporting for an audience that you think already agrees with you.

[00:33:22] BB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. This has come up on the show before, just like it's so inundating the number of the Substacks, and the newsletters, and the things. I mean, you could have a media consumption bill of \$179 a month if you know you could. So it's like, “Ooh, what's the next evolution of it? Is it going to die down?” I don't know. I think we're going to see what shakes out.

[00:33:46] CO: Yeah. I mean, like you saw already, things change so quickly, right? Like you saw already a couple weeks ago, the Atlantic announced that they're hiring like six different Substack people back into a magazine to distribute their newsletters that way.

[00:34:02] BB: Yeah, I know, right? Like, wow! What an evolving time. What an evolving time.

[00:34:07] CO: But you know what? At the same time, like I do think that the some of the more inventive stuff that has come out of the sSubstack wave or whatever, like the idea of having a

discord where you can engage directly Discord, like being in a chat forum, essentially, with the writer and being in direct conversation with them. Like there's something that's really interesting about that. I mean, I already mentioned the ways that that can be a little bit warping, I guess, but it's also kind of exciting and fun, right? Like that's actually – There's something fresh with that that feels like exciting the way blogs once felt exciting. So I don't know. I don't want to like poopoo it entirely. But definitely, there's still a role for like an editor, right? And like an editorial mindset of a larger brand, or newsroom, or something like that. But also, there's also cool stuff going on.

[00:34:54] BB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Well, we've come to our end. That just goes to the mad lib. Are you open, Caroline, to playing our mad lib? Fill in the blank thing?

[00:35:05] CO: Sure. Yeah. I love that.

[00:35:06] BB: Yeah? Yeah. Okay. Sometimes they're fun. Sometimes they're silly. Sometimes they don't make any sense. But sometimes they're very accurate. So let's see what we get today. Let see what we get. Okay, first off, and emotion.

[00:35:19] CO: Tickled.

[00:35:20] BB: Tickled. That's a fun one. Great. Adjective. An adjective.

[00:35:26] CO: Crumpled.

[00:35:28] BB: Crumpled. This can be good. Okay. Another adjective.

[00:35:33] CO: Dogged.

[00:35:34] BB: Dogged. Very good. A greeting.

[00:35:41] CO: Cheerio.

[00:35:41] BB: Cheerio. And then a verb.

[00:35:47] **CO:** Slice.

[00:35:48] **BB:** Slice. Okay. A noun.

[00:35:53] **CO:** Pickle.

[00:35:54] **BB:** Pickle. An adjective.

[00:35:58] **CO:** Jaunty.

[00:35:58] **BB:** Jaunty. Oh, look at these words today. How exciting. A cringe-worthy PR term or phrase, like, “Just following up for the 17th time.”

[00:36:10] **CO:** A cringe-worthy PR phrase. Like I saw you wrote about. I saw you wrote this. I have like a Twitter thread that was like, “I saw you wrote about like poultry factory workers getting their fingers chopped off. And I thought you’d want to know about this reusable toilet paper or something.” It’s like, “What?”

[00:36:33] **BB:** Are you serious? Did that actually happen?

[00:36:36] **CO:** That exact example, no. Unfortunately, did not happen. But there were some ones were just like, “Okay. Look, I understand you have a quota, but just send me the pitch. It doesn’t have to pretend to be something it’s not.”

[00:36:47] **BB:** Yeah, okay. A part of a pitch.

[00:36:50] **CO:** This is in our mad lib? A part of a pitch?

[00:36:52] **BB:** Yes. Yes. This is also a part of it. Yes. So we did the term. And now, what is the part of a pitch? Like boilerplate.

[00:36:59] **CO:** I have no idea. Salutation, I guess?

[00:37:01] **BB:** Okay. Salutation. We'll take it. We'll take it. Okay. Length of time.

[00:37:05] **CO:** Two years.

[00:37:06] **BB:** Two years. Perfect. The name of a real person ideally alive.

[00:37:13] **CO:** Steve Wozniak.

[00:37:14] **BB:** Okay. Steve Wozniak. Okay. Okay. And then lastly, an emotion.

[00:37:22] **CO:** I feel frazzled.

[00:37:26] **BB:** Okay. Frazzled. Okay. All right. Here we go. From the top. "When I think of the future of journalism, I feel tickled. The pitches I receive have gone from crumpled to dogged. If I receive a pitch that starts with cheerio, I slice. When I write stories on pickles, I get jaunty. My favorite pitches include I saw you wrote about the finger chopping off, and salutations. I normally take around two years to respond to my emails, but if it's Steve Wozniak, I will respond to immediately. If you do get a response back for me, you should know that I feel very frazzled for you. I kind of like it.

[00:38:05] **CO:** I think that's like largely actually accurate and doesn't sound like a mad lib. It sounds like truth.

[00:38:11] **BB:** That's the beauty of these. They sometimes are shocking. Shockingly on point. Caroline, it's been so lovely. having you. Thank you so much. And given us the insights on what you're working on. What pisses you off, of course, with pitches, and what the inequity team is dealing with at BuzzFeed. It's important.

[00:38:31] **CO:** Thank you so much.

[00:38:32] **BB:** Yes, thank you. Have a great rest of the day. And I hope you enjoy those coffees. The coffees and the beans and the – What is it? A coffee gift bag? The pack thing?

[00:38:40] CO: Yeah, it's coffee subscription.

[00:38:42] BB: Okay. What is it though? So I want to look it up right now.

[00:38:46] CO: I'm not plugging this for financial purposes, but the company is called Craft Coffee.

[00:38:50] BB: Yes. Craft coffee. Got it. All right. I'm going to look it up. Thank you so much. Have a great one.

[00:38:56] CO: Thanks. Nice to meet you. Have a good day.

[OUTRO]

[00:38:59] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Caroline O'Donovan from BuzzFeed News. 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 guests. 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.

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