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Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, the podcast by One Pitch, featuring well-known journalists from the top US-based publications, covering technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, products, and services, and more. The goal of our show is to uncover the real person behind the real stories you'd love to read.

Jered Martin:

We discuss their beat and news coverage, what their inbox looks like, the types of pitches they receive, and lots more. Maya Schwayder joins us on the show today. Maya is a freelance writer and most recently was a privacy and tech reporter for Digital Trends. She has an extensive experience reporting from various locations, including New York, Berlin, Washington DC, and Boston. On the episode today, Maya tells us about her recent gig on Digital Trends, how long she spends reviewing pitches that she also places into one of two categories, a recent pitch subject line that caught her attention, and why? And lots more. Let's hear more from Maya on today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Welcome everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. Happy to have you here listening to us today. We have the wonderful, and I'm excited about this conversation, given your extensive career Maya so far and everything from your Italian background to your psychology background, all these things. We have Maya Schwayder here, freelance right now, been all over the places you guys just heard on that pre-roll introduction. Thank you for being here. Maya.

Maya Shwayder:

I'm so excited to do this. Thanks for having me.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yes. First thing we'd like to talk about your inbox. What's happening in there? It's maybe changed recently, but like how bad are the pitches and how do you organize it?

Maya Shwayder:

It has changed a bit recently since I was laid off. I was recording this mid October. So I was laid off about a week ago.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Maya Shwayder:

The pitch volume has gone down.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

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Maya Shwayder:

Which I honestly appreciate because it gives me a little more time to focus.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Maya Shwayder:

But I will say as the pitch volume has gone down, the general quality of the pitches has also gotten worse. It seems like all of the people who I enjoyed talking to, or who usually would send me interesting things have faded into the background and the people who I'm going to guess that they weren't paying attention to what was happening in the journalism industry. All of those people are still in my inbox, bugging me about things that I, not that I didn't care about them, but just, it was unclear where I was going to be able to place those stories. And now it's even more unclear. So it's sort of well, what am I going to have to sift through today?

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I have to say you're, I think the first person we've had on well, people have changed around, but like who just experienced, being laid off and we all know the situation in journalism right now, so understanding, so freshly the change of your inbox, this is the first time we're hearing the insight into that.

Maya Shwayder:

Yeah. I mean, I'm sure it's different for everyone.

Beck Bamberger:

Of course. Yeah.

Maya Shwayder:

I will say that it really is only within the last year because I lived abroad for so long. It really is only within the last year that I started experiencing like the stereotypical journalists inbox of just stuff flooding in that you really weren't expecting, and don't necessarily have the time to look at. The two that end in terms of organizing. I have two diff... I use Gmail as my primary inbox and I have two different labels that I use. So I do my level best to try to at least take between five and 30 seconds to look at emails that come in. And what I will do is I will label it one of two things, either just generic press releases, stuff that I'll get around to maybe when I have time.

Maya Shwayder:

And then I have another sub label that says, look at these. And that is press releases that I took a look at and thought, Oh, this might actually be interesting, but I don't have time right now let me come back to this and actually look at it later. So, that is the general organization tree. And because I'm freelance, I won't really assign out which story I'm going to put in which place until I've actually found a home for it. So that involves more emails being sent out and spreadsheets tracking, which editors I've harassed about what and such and such.

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Beck Bamberger:

Now. Okay. Did you look at every single email previously in your full-time job? Cause that's rare.

Maya Shwayder:

Right. I will not say I looked at every single, I will say I did my best to look at 80% of the ones that came in.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That's still pretty high.

Maya Shwayder:

It's still high. And I will say, as someone who in my profile, isn't quite as high as someone who maybe works at an NPR or New York times. So their inboxes are, I'm sure much fuller than mine. I do the math at one point. I think I get, I don't know, maybe three to 500 unsolicited emails a month from PR folks.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh.

Maya Shwayder:

My editor, my former editor at digital trends where I was previously working, he would get around oh, a thousand a day. Which that is a really unsustainable amount. So I tried to take advantage of the fact that mine is maybe a little bit more manageable to try to give the pitches they're due because I having interacted with PR people in this way, I understand the goal that a lot of them have and where they're coming from. That doesn't mean that necessarily can help you out or am interested in the story that you have. But I will at least try to open the email, read the subject line, read the first couple of sentences. And if it grabs me, then I'll keep reading. And if not, then I am a.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Any good pitches as, let's say in the last six months that had a subject line that just grabbed you?

Maya Shwayder:

Yes. Actually one of the last stories I wrote for digital trends, this person did a really good job targeting this story. I had written a bit previously about native Americans living on reservations, who were struggling with internet connectivity at a time when that is our lifeline. Everyone needs internet and everyone needs fast, reliable internet.

Maya Shwayder:

And that is just not a thing that many people in this country have access to, especially if you're living out on the Navajo reservation, a three hour drive from the nearest big city. So I had done some reporting on this and then this person who I'd never met them before, but they ended up in my inbox and the subject line was something along the lines of, the American library association is proud to announce that these native libraries on these reservations had banded together to create a local broadband network.

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Maya Shwayder:

And I read that. I was like, Oh man, that is my shit. That is exactly what I want to be writing about. And it was just, it was a little story. It took like one day to report and it certainly is nothing like life-changing, is not going to win me any awards, but it was the type of story that I really enjoy writing about. This person I asked her how she found me and she said, "Oh, I was doing research about who had written about this previously, and I found you, so I decided to take a chance". I'm like, good job. You did the right thing.

Beck Bamberger:

Good.

Maya Shwayder:

I mean, yeah. So I guess that shows like just a little bit of research into some recent stories that someone does can, that can yield some results. So yeah, that was, that's one that's really stuck with me because that was a cold pitch. I had no idea who this person was, but they did a good job.

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Beck Bamberger:

So that describes okay, from a cold pitch and you were already writing about it, but what about something, and this is what we'd like to talk about of the making of a story. So for example, you did one for Digital Trends about the angst that students were feeling college students about Proctor apps.

Maya Shwayder:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

And how invasive that is. Where does a story like that come from? Do they come from pitches? Are you like in the shower and you have a moment of inspiration? Are you looking at something on Netflix and you're like, Oh. How did the thought come about?

Maya Shwayder:

That one came from a report, I think. I want to say that came from a report that I saw on the website of the electronic frontier foundation, which as I'm sure many people know is one of the premier pro privacy groups in the US.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Maya Shwayder:

And I saw a report that they had done about trying to fight back against proctoring apps and how they were really invasive. And this just, it was a light bulb moment of, Oh crap, this is going to be a thing because schools are all remote now. And this is something that I had done some reporting on with a friend of mine about how remote school was just changing absolutely everything around educational

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technology and the way people learn and like disability access and things like that. So as someone who is slash was a privacy reporter for Digital Trends, I thought, Oh man, I haven't seen anything about this yet.

Maya Shwayder:

So I got in touch with the EFF and said, I'd really like to talk to your expert about this. And then it, fortunately things were able to fall into place from there. She was able to connect with a few students with another expert who was working on this and that all managed to fall into place. It took a little while, that report, I think I spent a good three weeks on and it came together at the last minute because it was one of those things where like I talked to the report or I talked to the expert and he said, "Oh yeah, don't worry I'll put you in touch". And then I don't hear from her. And then I find another person and I get back to them and then the next person comes forward. And it's just sort of this like dogged, you have to keep poking at the problem for the thing to finally be written.

Beck Bamberger:

God. So do you have a big swath of how long a story takes? Sometimes it can take, especially if it's breaking news, it can take hours.

Maya Shwayder:

Right.

Beck Bamberger:

But Oh 48 hours to, four months you're working on something. Would you experience that?

Maya Shwayder:

I mean, it can really vary. I will say for a lot of places I've worked and this is true I think for a lot of journalists, we all work in service of the demon, that is the internet these days, and the internet is a content monster and you always just need to be turning out content.

Beck Bamberger:

You have to feed it, the monster.

Maya Shwayder:

If you ever defeat this monster, you can only mildly satisfy it for a day.

Beck Bamberger:

Is no true.

Maya Shwayder:

Yeah. It really, I mean, but what this means is that a lot of your stories are same-day turnaround. Which is not my favorite, like I get the need to get the information out there, but this is one of my least favorite things about being a journalist is when you have an editor or a producer, who's on you to be like, there's this big breaking news story, let's get original sources, a new reporting and a brand new angle and some new experts to talk about it in the space of, let's be honest, it's not even 24 hours, it's five hours.

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Maya Shwayder:

Like news breaks at 10:00 AM, you have until 4:00 PM to get the thing reported. **And to that end, the way PR people can really help in that respect is just be fast on your email. If a reporter is contacting you and needs to, find an expert ASAP, they need that expert ASAP. And it can benefit both of you. If you are, on your email, I can find... Some of the PR people I'm closest to are people who, I've never met them in real life, but they have been there for me when I really needed to find a person to talk to. And I owe them a lot for that.** I've said that before elsewhere, but it really is true. So yeah, for those same day turnaround stories, you really need to be fast and everyone hates doing earliest, I hate doing them.

Maya Shwayder:

I always wish I had more time. I like to be able to spend two or three days on a story, if it's not a big investigation, if I'm spending longer, it probably means the story isn't going to happen, or I'm just, wasting my time, barking up the wrong tree somehow. Especially as a freelancer, I'm willing to put in two to three days of effort to try to make a story happen. And after that, it's diminishing returns. You have a full-time person somewhere, then you have a little bit more flexibility. Okay. I can spend two weeks. I can spend three weeks. I can spend four weeks. If it's something that's really, really in depth because my livelihood doesn't depend on me, churning out content in the way it does. If you're a freelancer.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, Man.

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Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue. After this brief message brought to you by one pitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways One Pitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) to learn about our new One Pitch 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.

Beck Bamberger:

Let's play a little word association game.

Maya Shwayder:

Oh boy. Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

These are fun. Okay. So I'm going to say a word and you just, you just come out with your first thought.

Maya Shwayder:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

Food.

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Maya Shwayder:

Pasta.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink.

Maya Shwayder:

Bubble water. This is what my stepson's call, soda water.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby.

Maya Shwayder:

Cello.

Beck Bamberger:

Boston.

Maya Shwayder:

Red Sox.

Beck Bamberger:

Berlin.

Maya Shwayder:

Nightlife.

Beck Bamberger:

Remote learning.

Maya Shwayder:

Ouch.

Beck Bamberger:

Social media.

Maya Shwayder:

Yuck.

Beck Bamberger:

Harvard.

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Maya Shwayder:

It's where I live.

Beck Bamberger:

Facebook.

Maya Shwayder:

No thank you.

Beck Bamberger:

Broadcasting.

Maya Shwayder:

Fun.

Beck Bamberger:

Deep fakes.

Maya Shwayder:

Yikes.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism.

Maya Shwayder:

Yes, please.

Beck Bamberger:

And pitch.

Maya Shwayder:

Please respond.

Beck Bamberger:

Please respond. Yes. Oh, this is so true. Well now maybe in your time, since you don't need to be feeding the monster of the internet machine, maybe so much. I'm curious to hear if this changes anything for you, but what are you reading?

Maya Shwayder:

Ooh, good question. I'm one of those people who's always reading five books at once. I literally have five books with me. So I'm in Washington DC right now as we're recording this, doing some election reporting.



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Beck Bamberger:

Oh gosh.

Maya Shwayder:

And I literally, I brought two books with me and I picked up three more books while I'm here.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh wow.

Maya Shwayder:

This is how my brain works. So two of those books, one is a great, it's a very small book by Margaret Sullivan, who's currently the media critic for the Washington post. Basically it's like an extended column about the death of local news and via the ripple effects that has had on local governance and local communities. And it is really, really stark. She focuses most... It's called ghosting the news. Yes, I can highly recommend it. It will take you like an afternoon to read. And is very insightful, she's very good. She focuses mostly on newspapers because that's her background. She does mention how local radio and local TV has sort of taken a different track than local newspapers have. But what has been super interesting about reading this book is discussing it with my friends who are not journalists.

Maya Shwayder:

So for instance, my partner is a software engineer and he keeps track of the news. He has people in his family who were politicians, he knows what's going on in the world around him, but I was reading sections of this book out loud to him. And him coming from the startup scene, he was saying, "Okay, but why is that a problem? Why is this a big deal that local news is dying? What does this actually mean?" And I'm trying to explain, it means there's more space for corruption to flourish, voters aren't as well-informed, you don't know who you're voting for. And he goes, "Yeah, but the product isn't being marketed correctly"

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, it's a marketing problem.

Maya Shwayder:

It is, to a certain extent. And it feels really distasteful as a journalist because you're taught that your mission in life, your goal as a journalist is to defend democracy and to educate the public. And it's this very noble mission, and everyone should be paying attention to what you're doing because it's so important.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Maya Shwayder:

And the reality is people are living their lives and they don't have time to pay attention to the news, and the news is so fast paced and it is so complicated sometimes. And it's so overwhelming that, your

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average person who doesn't have to pay attention to the news, of course, they're not going to. Everyone has other things that they're doing with their lives, taking care of sick relatives or trying to raise their kids or trying to look for a job. Everyone has their own stressors and it's gotten me thinking a lot, I haven't worked in startups.

Maya Shwayder:

This isn't my goal in life, but it's got me thinking a lot about how it is that the news needs to change and how it needs to market itself in order to start being able to fulfill its mission of trying to keep the public informed about what people are doing when they represent them in Congress, or just what's happening around them in the world, because that is ultimately what we are trying to do. So that's a long way of saying, read ghosting the news. Another book I'm reading right now. So I am low key obsessed with how horrible the fashion world is and just how terrible everyone who works in the fashion world is I am reading it's a couple years old now, it's a book called, Gods and Kings by Dana Thomas, I think is their name?

Beck Bamberger:

Gods and Kings. I'm looking it up now.

Maya Shwayder:

God's and Kings and it is a double biography of John Galliano and Alexander McQueen.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I've heard of this.

Maya Shwayder:

Oh, my God. It is salacious. It is so good. It is such good reporting. Oh, just speaking as a journalist, I really appreciate the access that this journalist got. It is... If you are at all interested in fashion, it is such a...

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah. I'm getting it now.

Maya Shwayder:

It is such an amazing book at like the behind the scenes of how big brands do and don't sustain themselves.

Beck Bamberger:

Is it, I mean, I don't know anything about it. Was it extreme rivalry between them?

Maya Shwayder:

I haven't gotten to that point of the book, it's just sort of tracking both of them and kind of the parallels of how they rose. Cause McQueen was a lot younger than Galliano, like Galliano, I think, Oh God, I'm

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forgetting. I think Galliano came up in like the seventies and the eighties and McQueen was a little more recent.

Maya Shwayder:

But it's just sort of tracking the parallels in their careers and how they were both very like working class, London boys more or less, and how they managed to claw their way up in this hyper competitive fashion world. And both of them were, well such are insanely talented, but then also all of the bullshit that happens in the fashion world and this stuff that you have to deal with, even when you've made it as a big designer. So this is just my low key obsession. And if this is something that you're interested in, I highly recommend it.

Beck Bamberger:

Fascinating. Okay. You got one more?

Maya Shwayder:

I'm mostly reading non fiction books right now. I don't know why, but another one is a book by Gretchen McCulloch, who is the Internet's favorite linguists. She's a Canadian linguist, and she wrote a book called Because Internet, which is a look at how the internet is changing the way we communicate. It's so interesting. She really breaks down the different generations of who started using the internet when and how they communicate with each other differently. Because even me, I'm 31 years old.

Maya Shwayder:

I've been using the internet for more than half of my life now, but the way my younger cousins use the internet is so different from how I do versus, we've all seen how our parents use the internet and how they're using email and how they may, or may not text, quote unquote, correctly compared to how we use the internet. So I can highly recommend that one, if you want, just something that has absolutely nothing to do with politics or people being horrible to each other, but it's still very much rooted in the real world.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Oh, well, that leads to the next question, which is, what's your take on the future of journalism?

Maya Shwayder:

Journalism is not going to go away that I am sure of. It's just, it's good to change fundamentally. Now the one thing that I've seen that I'm sure a lot of other people have noticed is it seems like every journalist and their mother is starting up a newsletter these days. And...

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Maya Shwayder:

Some of them are worth more than others, I will say, but the ones that are good are really, really good. And they tend to feature, journalists who have made a name for themselves or have built up a lot of

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sourcing and have the support to network, and whatever that means to venture out on their own and eventually like bring in their own contributors and their own people and their friends to help write this newsletter.

Maya Shwayder:

And they're reinventing the newspaper in a way, because as it turns out, if it's really good content and people trust you, people are willing to pay for that. So, that's really interesting to me. I really hope that what we're seeing is the start of a new shift in what the delivery mechanism of journalism will be. Because newsletters have been around for a while we're just sort of seeing them start to heat up now. And so I think what we're going to start seeing is more and more journalists, finding a way to start their own thing or hopping onto newsletters that are becoming quickly popular and that are getting paid subscribers to a point where they are paying just as well as your established media brands. I think that, the big, dinosaurs like the New York times and the Washington post, they're going to stay with us in some way, shape or form.

Maya Shwayder:

But what I'm most interested in seeing is how local news then develops. And if a place like Youngstown, Ohio, Anchorage, Alaska is going to eventually be able to have their, a thriving local news scene again, through this new newsletter trend that's happening. Because I believe in my core that people don't want to be dumb. People want to be educated, they want to be informed about the world around them.

Maya Shwayder:

But you can't have to meet them halfway, you can't always be banging them over the head with this corruption and that horrible scandal and this terrible thing is happening. They want to know what's happening in the world, but they also need a break occasionally. So I really hope that one thing that happens is people will be able to step back from this 24 hour news cycle that we've locked ourselves into and maybe focus a little bit more on just their town or their municipality or their state. Cause honestly like that, those are the politics that really matter.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, and I'm with you on the deluge that is now, unfortunately the news, you cannot keep up.

Maya Shwayder:

Oh man, I can't keep up. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. And as a consumer, you're defeated.

Maya Shwayder:

Absolutely. Oh my gosh. Yesterday, the day before we were recording this, I can't remember how I got into this, but I was talking to a couple of my non journalist friends about, how I experienced the news because it's so different from how they do like.

Beck Bamberger:

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Oh, I'm sure.

Maya Shwayder:

I have about 30 news apps on my phone that are just constantly dinging and sending me alerts and it's just part of my day. It's like, I am constantly seeing headlines and just absorbing that information and they don't live like that. So they were asking me, can you show us your phone screen, your home screen when you get a ton of news alerts. So at the end of the day, it was around midnight.

Maya Shwayder:

I sent them just a screen recording of me scrolling through all of the news alerts that I had gotten in one day and yesterday was October 12th. So, that was a pretty average news day, we had a Nobel prize announced in the morning. Then Amy Coney Barrett hearings had started up in the afternoon. And I was scrolling through it and it took a solid minute of me scrolling through what was probably around 200 news alerts. And at the end of it, my friends were like, how do you do this? I went, I don't know any other way to be, this is just how I am. But this is definitely not something that your average person can interact with.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. So perhaps there is going to be this reckoning between consumer and that desire, which I think is very optimistic of you, Maya. People want to be informed, people want to be smart or at least pretend to be in the know or, and up to speed.

Maya Shwayder:

Right.

Beck Bamberger:

And, but what is then that balance?

Maya Shwayder:

There is going to have to be some sort of reckoning as you put it because, we all know, like I said, we all know people who, they just, they want to know who they're voting for. They don't want to not vote. They want to be good citizens, but they just don't have the bandwidth for it because you need so much bandwidth. So there's going to have to be a shrinkage or in a Nisha vacation, maybe of the news. And yeah, we're going to have to see how that all spins out. To that end I'm available for hire anyone who's looking.

Beck Bamberger:

That's right. You all can hire Maya right now. You got her information. Oh, well lastly, Maya, I would love to play a little mad libs with you, which is one of our favorite things. So I'll give you the thing and then at the end, I'm going to read it back to you.

Maya Shwayder:

Sure.

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Beck Bamberger:

Okay. A catchphrase, any catchphrase you like.

Maya Shwayder:

Oh gosh. Stay classy, San Diego.

Beck Bamberger:

Stay classy, San Diego. I'm in San Diego right now. Yes. What's a journalist's scare phrase.

Maya Shwayder:

Oh gosh. Oh, I know. Thank you for your media request. Please know that we are processing your request and we'll get back to you as soon as possible. That means that no one's getting back to you.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. What about an empowering journalism buzzword?

Maya Shwayder:

I don't know if this is a buzz word, but defenders of democracy. How we like to think of ourselves.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Okay. Great. An adjective.

Maya Shwayder:

An adjective, slimy.

Beck Bamberger:

Slimy. Part of a pitch.

Maya Shwayder:

Hi, Maya. I see that you wrote about XYZ company recently. Do you want to write about XYZ, other completely unrelated company as well?

Beck Bamberger:

Perfect. Okay. Another adjective.

Maya Shwayder:

Sunny.

Beck Bamberger:

Sunny. And then what about another part of a pitch?

Maya Shwayder:

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If you're interested, I can connect you to this white dude CEO who can talk about the thing you want to talk about.

Beck Bamberger:

Great. And then amount of time?

Maya Shwayder:

24 hours.

Beck Bamberger:

Another adjective?

Maya Shwayder:

Bendy.

Beck Bamberger:

Bendy. That's a new one. Great singular noun.

Maya Shwayder:

Book.

Beck Bamberger:

And then how about a topic?

Maya Shwayder:

Any topic in the world?

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Maya Shwayder:

Healthcare.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. A verb ending in ING.

Maya Shwayder:

Scouting.

Beck Bamberger:

And then just a verb.

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Maya Shwayder:

Just a verb. Run.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Are you ready?

Maya Shwayder:

Yes. Oh boy. This is going to be a mess.

Beck Bamberger:

Sometimes they're shockingly accurate. So let's see.

Maya Shwayder:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

To me, tech journalism is stay classy San Diego. It consists of thank you for your media requests and being a defender of democracy on the daily. If a pitch has a slimy hi, Maya, I heard you wrote about X. I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a sunny, if you're interested this white dude, CEO can talk to, you can expect no reply from me. If 24 hours goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not bendy about it. The best stories always have a book and are usually about healthcare. And the best way to reach me is by scouting it to me, or you can also run it over to me.

Maya Shwayder:

That was pretty accurate. That was pretty good.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Another successful one. Oh, Maya thank you for being on with us today, especially in this pivot of your career and this crazy time.

Maya Shwayder:

Of course, this is a delight.

Beck Bamberger:

Thank you for being out there. This is a lot of fun.

Maya Shwayder:

Thanks a lot.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for tuning into this week's episode of coffee with the journalist featuring Maya Shwayder. If you like our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google podcasts, and anywhere else you listen



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