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Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, a podcast by OnePitch, 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 love to read. We discuss their beat and news coverage, what their inbox looks like, the types of pitches they receive, and lots more.

Jered Martin:

Today on the show we're joined by Mohana Ravindranath. Mohana has been a reporter for Politico since 2017, and currently covers and tracks evolving stories within health tech, data privacy, algorithms, and the digital divide. Prior to 2017, Mohana worked for notable news outlets such as The Washington Post, Business Insider, and The Daily Pennsylvania. Mohana tells us more about her chaotic inbox, filled with over 50,000 emails, how she separates buzz from real news, the complexity of covering the eHealth industry, her role as a reporter and more. Let's hear more from Mohana on today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Welcome everyone to Coffee with a Journalist. We are full steam into Season Two here, with a bunch of all-star journalists, including who we have on today, which you guys have just heard all about. But Mohana, welcome. We're so excited to have you. You're with Politico and, just to make sure we have this correct, I want to make sure we get your title also correct here. Because you've been at Politico for just, well, a couple of years now, as a reporter.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Almost three years.

Beck Bamberger:

Excellent. And covering health tech, as we heard, and a bunch of other areas. We're going to get into pitches and I'm just excited you're here. Are you drinking coffee?

Mohana Ravindranath:

I'm trying to wean myself off coffee. I didn't use to drink it before I joined Politico, then I started drinking it. Now I'm trying to dial it back. So I'm on water today.

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Beck Bamberger:

Good, me too. Yeah, as I've been talking to folks during this time, people had been having problems with cutting back, it sounds like, on their coffee intake. So yeah, we can all relate to that. Well, thank you for being here. First thing we like to get into is your inbox. How's it looking? Is it crazy with pitches?

Mohana Ravindranath:

It always is, and I'm not one of those inbox zero people. So I've got, I think 55,000 last time I checked.

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Beck Bamberger:

Oh my goodness.

Mohana Ravindranath:

It's a bit of chaos.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, so there's two major schools of thought here. There is the, we seem to have the inbox zero people, and then they look sometimes never at a pitch. They just mass delete. And then there's, I would say your category of folk. So do you just let it roll? Let's talk about this.

Mohana Ravindranath:

I do. I think I've been able to get it down to zero once or twice in my life, and that was quite a big step for me. They just keep coming in. So I do try to get to as many as I can, but I'm kind of drowning in emails.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Okay, so how do you suss out pitches then? Or do you just not even look at those? How would you describe?

Mohana Ravindranath:

I guess I look at the emails that interest me. And there isn't really a particular hard and fast rule for what that means, because what I cover evolves. **I am often covering things related to privacy. I'm often covering things related to contact tracing and apps and all these things. So pitches aren't really the main way that I'm doing reporting. I am listening to what my sources in the field are saying, and I'm listening to what people are talking about. Every so often, I'll come across an email that has something to do with that. That's sort of what catches my attention.**

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Beck Bamberger:

So pitches, okay, don't sound to be the source of a story for you.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Right.

Beck Bamberger:

Do you ever use it as just a thematic indicator? Like, "Oh, that's interesting. I got 10 pitches about that in the last two weeks."

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yes, definitely. I've noticed over the years as I transitioned from different beats, I noticed that obviously the tenor and the topic of the pitches I receive is different, but it does indicate what people are interested in. Where there's money flowing sort of indicates what people are interested in. Often the pitches that I see in my inbox are funding deals and, "We launched this new app," and things like this. So

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it does give me a sense of what people are talking about, what the buzzwords are. But I think part of my job as a journalist is to separate what's buzzy and what's getting a lot of attention, from what actually warrants for their attention and oversight.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Then with this gigantic inbox that you have that just keeps going, is there any filing that happens, of any pitches.

Mohana Ravindranath:

I usually try to do my organization, my story lists and all that stuff, I'll do that in Google Docs.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, okay.

Mohana Ravindranath:

The first line of defense is email, of course. But then after that, I'll transition the things that are interesting and that peak my interest into a Google Doc and then pursue the themes and the story leads that I come up with over there. So it's kind of a multi-platform system that I have. I'm still working on it and it evolves, obviously, but-

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Any journalists, I think especially today, is working on many different planes of stories, like the quick pops and then the more in-depth kind of investigative things, and the things that you think might be a trend, but you're not quite sure, and you're sort of waiting to hear whether it really is organically a trend, those kinds of things. I've worked on what I'm hoping to perfect as I delve more into journalism and into health tech in particular, is how to manage all those different planes in the most efficient way.

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Beck Bamberger:

You mentioned this with your sources here, so you're not getting necessarily story ideas from pitches, but you're getting them maybe, or listening to them, from your sources. How does a story that you do actually come about? For example, you were just doing, a piece that you recently wrote was about hurdles into med school diversity.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Beck Bamberger:

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Did that come from a conversation with a couple people, or were you taking a walk and you thought, "You know what? Let me look into this." How do these stories come about, when they're especially longer form and more in-depth like these?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah, **I think my main reporting technique is just to listen. I think what helps me do that is to reach out to, and talk to, the most diverse set of people that I can, and people at every level of the healthcare system.** And for that particular story, even beyond the provision of healthcare, into the education, the training of the people that provide care. Even to talk to the people in that realm, you have to talk to students and you have to talk to administrators, and then you talk to the people that regulate or monitor medical education. So there are all these different kinds of planes. And I'm sure this is true in any industry, that it's so complex. There are so many levels here. But **I think what delivers the most complex and meaningful stories are the ones that incorporate the feedback and the perspectives of all those different levels.**

Mohana Ravindranath:

For that med school story, I talked to students. I had chatted with people who are going through that process. Then I talked to people on the other end of the spectrum who are looking at applications, and what kinds of things are they looking for? And then talked to the groups that regulate that whole process outside of the schools. Then once you talk to enough people, you start to hear these themes emerge. That's where I find the most value in reporting, is extracting those themes. But it does take a lot of conversations with people, sort of organic conversations, that sometimes don't lead to a story. Sometimes it's just a good conversation, and sometimes it just is something that leads, it becomes a story later when you hear another piece of it, somewhere down the line.

Beck Bamberger:

How often does that happen, where you let's say abandon the story? Does that happen like 50% of the time?

Mohana Ravindranath:

I don't have a number. There were some times that I think that I'm probably abandoning too many stories and other times where I'm working on too many at the same time, which means that one of them needs to be abandoned. So I don't have a number for it, but I think one of the things I've learned to do as a journalist, and I hope to improve upon, is figuring out when it's not the right time for a story.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Sometimes you can pop something out, it's super quick. But sometimes there are things that are just sort of ruminating. I mean, something that requires a little bit more marinating, something that maybe there are only two examples, and you need a third strong example just to adequately describe to readers how important this thing is. Depending on how newsworthy thing is, I think it's important to give oneself time to really fill that out, and incorporate everybody's perspective.

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Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Man, I could just imagine a story you're working on, I know this has been the case with other people we've had on here, where it's months and it's just months and you're just building the qualitative insights and the interviews to finally pop a piece, it finally comes out. Oh my gosh, it really can be a lot. Versus, okay, a hard piece of news comes out, you got a story up in four hours because that's the news cycle. It's really interesting.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Right. And **I love that about journalism, and my role in particular, that there are so many ways that we can put out information.**

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Mohana Ravindranath:

But **I really do love the little bit more free-form process of learning about a topic organically. I think you sometimes are able to turn off the pitch brain and that way, and just sort of hear, just trust yourself to extract what's important, and discover it as an outsider, as person who's new to the field, versus what people are telling you. I think that it gives you the opportunity to determine for yourself what's important versus what people are telling you is important.**

Beck Bamberger:

Speaking of people telling you what's important, from publicists, since that's who a lot of this show is listened to by, do you have anybody who just pitches you a valuable source, someone you'd want to get on the phone with, because they represent Dr. So-and-so who's the leading, I don't know, clinician at some hospital system or something? Are those ever valuable to connect you to sources?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Sure, yeah. I think the important thing, what I like to do as a journalist, my philosophy really, is that we take all this into consideration. **I like to think of my role as akin to a researcher or an analyst or something. My role is never to create an ad for somebody, or to include somebody's name in a story. My role is to talk to the people that are important and to suss out where the story is. Of course the experts that come through can be part of that process, and even if it's just informational, of course, can be a part of that process. But I like to think about my role as a reporter as figuring out what actually is important again, instead of just believing that something is important because somebody told me it was.**

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Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jered Martin:

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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.

Beck Bamberger:

On a lighter topic, Mohana, let's play a little word association game.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Sure.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm going to give you a word. You gave me the first word out. Let's see what happens.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Okay. Let's try it.

Beck Bamberger:

Food?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Comfort.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Wine.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Cooking.

Beck Bamberger:

Health tech?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Burgeoning?

Beck Bamberger:

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Virtual medicine?

Mohana Ravindranath:

The future.

Beck Bamberger:

COVID?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Vaccine.

Beck Bamberger:

Data privacy?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Essential.

Beck Bamberger:

Diversity?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Essential.

Beck Bamberger:

2020?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Election.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). 2021?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Hopeful for a return to normalcy.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism?

Mohana Ravindranath:

The future.

Beck Bamberger:

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Oh, we're going to get into that in just a second. Pitch?

Mohana Ravindranath:
Meeting.

Beck Bamberger:
Inbox?

Mohana Ravindranath:
Drowning.

Beck Bamberger:
By the way, how many emails typically would you get in a day? How much does this 50,000 mark, like when does it get to 60,000?

Mohana Ravindranath:
That's a good question. I don't know, because my system separates out the mass emails from the regular ones.

Beck Bamberger:
Yeah.

Mohana Ravindranath:
It must be somewhere in the hundreds, but I also have all these news alerts and like this.

Beck Bamberger:
Yeah.

Mohana Ravindranath:
Part of that 55,000 is that I've not been great about cleaning out the junk either. But it is unmanageable, for sure.

Beck Bamberger:
Wow, blows my mind. That's like the worst vacation come back, when you have to then sort through all those emails [crosstalk 00:12:11]-

Mohana Ravindranath:
Oh, yeah. It's horrible.

Beck Bamberger:
It'd be like, oh my God.

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Mohana Ravindranath:

And even those times that I was able to get down to inbox zero, it took the whole day. What's the return on that? I don't know.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Okay. So maybe emails are not the highest attention of your reading, but what are you reading, Mohana? Because we always love to ask. And you know what, we've expanded this to, what are you listening to, watching? We'll take podcasts, Netflix. What you got?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Sure.

Beck Bamberger:

Anything good?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Well, I do try to keep my information sources as diverse as possible. I spend a lot of time not only reading and listening to news sources, but also just monitoring Twitter and social media for just the conversations that people are having and what's important to them. But in terms of books, I just, I'm a little bit late to the game, but I started reading Dreamland about the opioid epidemic.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Oh, that was a good one, sad as it is.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah, yeah. I hadn't read it before, but I have been reporting on some topics related to the opioid crisis, the intersection of the opioid crisis and technology. I've read excerpts, but never read the whole thing.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, and this was also by another reporter, a Los Angeles Times reporter.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah, Sam Quinones.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Mohana Ravindranath:

One of the things I've enjoyed about writing about healthcare and health tech is being able to couch what I write in the perspective of patients. It's not something that I am able to do in every story, but I do like to at least think about the impact on the patients as much as I can. And I think this book is really great at addressing the whole spectrum of the people and the institutions that are involved.

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Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I wonder how has that been, not to go off on a tangent here, but I wonder how the opiate problem, because it was, man, that was really festering, especially in some particular states and regions, at least in America, how that's been sideswiped, if at all by COVID? Has it accelerated? Has it gone down? Are people turning to it more? I feel like I haven't heard about it in the last year of this whole COVID thing, because COVID has eclipsed everything.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah, my colleague, Brianna Ehley has been doing a lot of really great reporting about that. She tends to cover those kinds of public health topics. But especially on this problem, this particular problem, the attention has sort of turned.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, understandably. But then you kind of wonder, like what happened over there?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Right, and I hear from mental health providers all the time that this is an ongoing problem, and that things like isolation and-

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Mohana Ravindranath:

... being disconnected from people, and also tele-health is obviously burgeoning during the pandemic. But there are some restrictions that could make it harder for people to get medication for their treatment for opioid disorder, opioid use disorder. So there are all kinds of issues that are festering, but that I'm hoping to be able to shed a little bit more light on, too.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Well, any other books, any other thing else you're loving right now?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah. Well, I was also reading Mexican Gothic and I can't tell too much about it without giving it away, but-

Beck Bamberger:

What is this? What is this? Wait, okay, let's let's talk about it. Tell us a little bit about it.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Fiction and that's all I can say without giving it away.

Beck Bamberger:

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Oh, wait, wait, but I can read the little blurb. I can read the little blurb. Okay, Mexican Gothic is a 2020 Gothic horror novel by Mexican Canadian author Silvia Moreno-Garcia. It centers on a young woman investigating her cousin's claims that her husband is trying to murder her. Oh, I am in. Great.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yes, tell me what you think of it when read it.

Beck Bamberger:

Is it one that you can read in like a weekend, because it's so good, and you're just turning like crazy?

Mohana Ravindranath:

I've been reading it incrementally, but yes, I think the next time I sit down I'll just spend a couple of hours and hopefully power through it. It's great.

Beck Bamberger:

It has 3000-plus ratings. Oh yeah, this is, okay, I missed this. Excellent. This is where I get all my stuff.

Mohana Ravindranath:

I like to supplement with the little fiction.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, you have to, you have to. I was reading this whole dissertation about the profound benefit of specifically book fiction, as it relates to reshaping ours and society's view of heroes or figures or people who are in positions of power, or how it shapes our narratives. Fiction has a lot of merit in that. I think it's completely underrated. People think it's silly, but no, there's a lot of power to fiction.

Mohana Ravindranath:

I think it's essential.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, another essential. Love it. Well, speaking of the future of journalism, what do you think? Positive?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah, I do feel positively about it. When I got into journalism officially in around 2012, it was kind of a bleak time and I don't feel that way anymore. I do think that the past, especially the past couple of election cycles, have demonstrated that there is so much appetite for news. And if we talk about my beat in particular, health tech, it's not going away. And it's such a complex topic that I foresee there being no shortage of stories and really, lots of really big looming questions, complex questions about the future of health technology. Who's going to regulate it? What does data privacy look like in this new world? And the blurring of state and federal regulations and things like this, those things are going to be around for a while and healthcare will always be an important topic to readers. So I do feel encouraged. On the industry of journalism, obviously there are always questions about how to pay for it, things like this. But

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in terms of people's appetite for stories, and especially when it comes to health and technology and policy and business, all those things, it's not going away.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). By the way, because you came from being an editorial intern, you had a couple of internships, and then you were at The Daily Pennsylvania, you did a features editor, when did you stumble or come to find health tech as an area that you really wanted to look at?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Yeah, it's been in the past couple years. I wasn't focused on health until I joined Politico, but I think it's been a theme. Technology has been a theme in my reporting since my first official job, I think, at The Washington Post, when I was covering small business, and then which lent itself to the tech startup world. I would sort of come up against health technology every so often when someone would talk to me about an app or something that had to do with health. Then when I was covering government technology at Nextgov, after The Washington Post, there were a couple of health-related things, like the VA has this huge health records contract, things like this. But health only really became my focus in the past few years, when I joined Politico. But I have very much appreciated the opportunity, like I said, to bring in the perspective of patients. But health technology and health itself is such a complex world that there's no shortage of perspectives and people to talk to about it.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh gosh, no. Never ending. Hence your inbox.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Exactly.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Well, last part here, Mohana, of our wonderful time together is our favorite part, I think, the Mad Libs part.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Oh yes.

Beck Bamberger:

So I'm going to give you, now hopefully you haven't listened to too many episodes, so you know what's going to come after this, but I'm going to just write down whatever you say.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

And then we're going to read it back, and we'll see if it's on point. Some of them are just silly. Some of them are very telling. We'll see.

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Mohana Ravindranath:

All right, sounds good.

Beck Bamberger:

So first is a catch phrase, any catch phrase?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Take it or leave it.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, there you go. Okay, a scare phrase that you would hear as a journalist?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Getting an email that says, "Urgent correction," or something like that.

Beck Bamberger:

Urgent correction. Perfect. What about an empowering word that you would hear as a journalist?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Impactful.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, perfect. An adjective?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Superfluous.

Beck Bamberger:

What about a part of a pitch?

Mohana Ravindranath:

I guess as a reporter, I would call it a nut graph, but sort of like the description of why this is important, nut graph.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Nut graph, let's go with that. I like it. Another adjective?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Lovely.

Beck Bamberger:

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Lovely. And then another part of a pitch?

Mohana Ravindranath:

How about a kicker?

Beck Bamberger:

Kicker, great. Amount of time?

Mohana Ravindranath:

A century.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay. That's the longest one I've heard so far, excellent. Okay, adjective?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Colorful.

Beck Bamberger:

A singular noun?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Painting.

Beck Bamberger:

Painting. A topic?

Mohana Ravindranath:

The Affordable Care Act.

Beck Bamberger:

Great. And then a verb ending in I-N-G?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Skipping.

Beck Bamberger:

Skipping, and then just as verb?

Mohana Ravindranath:

Thing.

Beck Bamberger:

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Okay, here we go. Reading it back. To me, tech journalism is take it or leave it. It consists of urgent corrections and impactful journalism on the daily. If a pitch has a superfluous nut graph, I absolutely will respond to it. However, if a pitch has a lovely kicker, you can expect no reply from me. If a century goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I'm not colorful about it. The best stories always have paintings and are usually about the Affordable Care Act. And the best way to reach me is to skip a pitch to me, but you can also sing it to me.

Mohana Ravindranath:

I think that's pretty spot on.

Beck Bamberger:

I think we nailed it. That's great. Oh, Mohana it was so lovely chatting with you today. Thanks for being on, so appreciate it.

Mohana Ravindranath:

Likewise, I really appreciate it.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Mohana Ravindranath from Politico. If you like our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's episode.

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