

Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee With a Journalist, a podcast featuring the tech industry's most well known tech journalists. We uncover the real person behind the real stories you love to read. We discuss their beat in news coverage, what their inbox looks like, and a whole lot more. I'm Jered Martin, the co-founder and chief operations officer at OnePitch. Our host for the show is Beck Bamberger, the co-founder of OnePitch, CEO of BAM Communications, and a current journalist. On this week's episode, we're joined by Adam Popescu, who has bylines in publications including the New York Times, Businessweek, Vanity Fair, and the Washington Post. Adam shares more about his thoughts on journalists and journalism, the books he enjoys reading, imposter syndrome as a freelance journalist, and more. Let's have a listen.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone. Welcome to Coffee With a Journalist today. Today we have on quite the contributing writer, and I'm very excited to have Adam Popescu on for us today. Adam, are you drinking anything particularly? Coffee, iced tea?

Adam Popescu:

At the moment, I am dry. I am dry.

Beck Bamberger:

Dry? Okay.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah. No dry cough, just nothing in my cup.

Beck Bamberger:

Nothing in the cup. Okay. We often don't have people drinking coffee on this Coffee With a Journalist show, so it's become kind of a funny thing of what people are actually drinking, but whatever floats your boat. So no need for anything. We'll just dive right in.

Beck Bamberger:

Just a little bit on you for folks who are not familiar so much with you. You're quite the contributor. You have pieces that have been just in the top national outlets of the world, the New York Times, Vanity Fair, National Geographic, Bloomberg Businessweek, Washington Post. You also are an author of a great book, Nima, which was out last year in May. I highly recommend everybody checks that out, which we need to talk about, Adam. It's about a young sherpa woman living in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah. That's light fare, right?

Beck Bamberger:

Light fare. I like this. And then as vast as your publication resume, your content has definitely varied and explored many stories, covering business and tech, personal profiles, including Mexican heads of states, and film icon Steven Spielberg. So we need a lot. This is great.

Adam Popescu:

Did you read my Hunter Biden story?

Beck Bamberger:

I did not.

Adam Popescu:

Oh, come on.

Beck Bamberger:

No.

Adam Popescu:

Beck, where you at?

Beck Bamberger:

I read a couple things, but frankly I have not read all your things, because it's a lot. It's a lot. But why don't we start with just telling us, telling our listeners here, how do you write a great story? Where does it start from?

Adam Popescu:

First off, thanks for having me, and thank you for doing what you're doing and talking to journalists, because I think we are a group who are a bunch of know-it-alls who can't get enough attention, and if I'm going to take a page out of the honesty book, that's how a lot of us feel.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That's okay.

Adam Popescu:

But here we are, and in an all truthfulness, the kind of stories that I think that I cover, I am really into story. And by that I mean I want to hear something that I haven't seen before. And if I'm going to cover a topic, there's that old adage that everything has been covered and everything has been written about or filmed. There's no real original ideas. And to a degree, it's true. To a degree, it's true. There's only so many stories. There's stories about loss, stories about growing up, stories about love, stories about death, when you really break down the archetypes of what there is and the narratives.

Adam Popescu:

But given that, my approach, when I tackle a subject or a source, I want to show an audience either an element of that person that they may not have seen, or to share a moment in that person's life that was transformational, that brought them to where they are, or just really be immersive and be visual with the writing so that a reader feels like they're there, because we have to compete against every other media platform, of whether it be film, podcasts, everything. We're competing against this, and this is a more archaic medium. We're writing. We're in some room clinking away on a keyboard when people don't have an attention span. Do people read in print? A lot of people don't. They're on their phone. So given all these limitations, and the industry, which I'm sure we'll be talking about, you have to approach it in a very pragmatic and practical way.

Beck Bamberger:

So then therefore, how do you get to something like doing a profile on Steven Spielberg?

Adam Popescu:

I think the one thing that you really have to do is, you can't put a no on something. And by that I mean, if you are ambitious and want to cover a topic or a person, you really have to exhaust all possibilities of reaching that person. I think that so many of us think, "Oh, well they're too difficult," or, "They're too famous," or, "They're too busy," or whatever. And the great thing about the age we live in is that it can be easier in certain respects to reach people. There's publicists. There are email addresses that are out there. There are phone numbers. There are so many ways to circumvent what would be once more traditional approaches, and maybe at one point you'd write a letter, you'd physically write a letter, and then that gets to that person if you're lucky.

Beck Bamberger:

Had that been successful for you? An actual handwritten letter?

Adam Popescu:

No. I think if we were in a time machine, maybe, but I think what I try to do is, I try to be respectful and I try to be persistent, and I think that's a combination that a lot of journalists use, and I think that works for them.

Beck Bamberger:

So break that down a little bit, because I know publicists can relate to the art of persistence, right?

Adam Popescu:

Sure.

Beck Bamberger:

Which has to be on the line of not being obsessive and annoying to the journalist, so I imagine when you're after getting that tip, getting that profile, et cetera, you need to use the same art as well. So do you have some suggestions for that? What are the rules in your book of persistence that doesn't cross the line?

Adam Popescu:

I think you have to be able to read between the lines. So many of us don't respond to emails in a timely manner. Does that mean that we don't care? Does that mean that it's a no? Or does that mean that we're just so busy that we haven't seen it or given it time? So everyone has their own rules of how many days they give, if they follow up again. I think I like to talk on the phone. I think that if you're comfortable picking up the phone to talk to a source, that is one approach. I know a lot of journalists do not like to be called by publicists, especially cold. I don't really like it either, because it can be a bit unexpected unless you have a relationship with that person.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

Right. I mean, it all goes back to relationships. If you feel comfortable with somebody, there's a level of maybe intimacy, and of course not in a romantic way, but an intimacy in terms of, "I can reach out via text message, maybe. Certainly email." But you have to really know who you're dealing with. It's almost easy to be transparent that you are just fishing for placing a product or placing your client, and that can be telegraphed. If you are a little more personal, real, a little more steeped in the subject, if you know what that person really covers.

Adam Popescu:

Also, you can't pitch somebody right after they run something on the thing that you're covering, or the thing that you're ... And a lot of publicists do that, and I don't think they get good mileage from that. Before the moment we're in, also, a lot of FaceTime. Being at events, meeting people, going the extra mile, and maybe even sometimes you read something from somebody, has nothing to do with anything, and even in your field, but you can send them a note and tell them that it meant something to you or that you connected with something, and I guarantee that that goes a long way, because people appreciate that.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

No matter what the field is.

Beck Bamberger:

Just acknowledgement. Isn't that great?

Adam Popescu:

Yeah. I think it's good manners, and it's being genuine. And those things, unfortunately, are few and far between these days.

Beck Bamberger:

What do you think as it relates to the future of journalism? Usually we cover that more at the end, but I kind of just rolled into that because I thought it was appropriate here. Yeah. What do you think of the future of journalism?

Adam Popescu:

I want to know what you think, from your standpoint.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh. Well, thanks for asking. I believe I'm optimistic, quite. I believe there's definitely a need for it in the era of Trump or the era of the virus, or just in a functioning democracy like never before. What we're seeing currently out of the transparency of China, for example, is not an ability to really know what the real deal is out there, and that's a downfall of lack of transparency and lack of true journalism there. So that's another reminder.

Beck Bamberger:

But also, I'm really bullish on the notion that journalists are having a rise of ... Celebrity is not the right word, but let's say social icon, or iconic place in our culture, more and more with being authors of these great topics. And an example is *Bad Blood*, which was explosive, and it was a bestseller, and all these great things, but a lot of journalists can become massive influencers, not only just on their Twitter following, but in great books that they write that become hits, as they command stages more and more. And just kind of similar to how chefs were never that, long before the shows came out that really put them as like, "Wow, these really creative and masterful people." I kind of feel journalists are going to have that moment and are having a bit of the moment. Not explosively yet, not at the pinnacle, but that we're on the way to that. That's where I stand.

Adam Popescu:

I think you're right that we're definitely in a moment when news has become an entertainment commodity in its own right. I had a story for the *New York Times* recently about a literary event series, which sounds like a nothing little thing, but presidential candidates now go to this ... It's almost like a literary salon. It's a place where everyone from Kamala Harris, to Amy Klobuchar, and Elizabeth Warren, to Bernie Sanders, they all were staying-

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah. Basically the point I'm trying to make is that people are so into what's going on on television and the White House, in our very complicated daily lives, that they look to these reporters and newscasters in a way as tastemakers, as celebrities that are ... The word celebrity in a different way, in terms of someone being actually famous, not being a movie star. And they look at them for guidance because they want to trust them, and they're also so goddamn interested and fascinated and salivating for the next story, the next whatever, because it's so interesting. You could never make it up. So once the purview of a novelist, the movie *Contagion* when it came out several years ago-

Beck Bamberger:

I know.

Adam Popescu:

... people thought, "Oh, that can never happen." The writer of that film was recently on Anderson Cooper, and he was saying that he could never even imagine the real life plot that we're in being in a film, because it's just so wild. And it shows that the world we live in is already ... It's so hard on so many levels. It's so hard to understand.

Beck Bamberger:

It's hard to process.

Adam Popescu:

It's hard to process. It's so hard to keep up. It's so hard to make a living.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

And we're seeing that more and more, so people are just sucked in. And so when you asked about the future of journalism, I think like every other medium, you're going to have winners and losers. It exposes the wide gaps, and a lot of publications are doing quite well. Local news is not-

Beck Bamberger:

No.

Adam Popescu:

... because they don't have the bank. They don't have the kitty for that. But a lot of other places, despite the rhetoric, CNN is doing quite well. I'm sure Fox News is doing quite well. The New York Times is doing well, The Atlantic, all these big places.

Beck Bamberger:

[crosstalk 00:12:27].

Adam Popescu:

The worry is that maybe that it becomes too many just large spots, and that the local level gets smaller, and that we no longer have the watchdogs on a smaller level. We don't have the weeklies, because all they're going under too. So we're in a moment now where it's unfortunate, the wheat and the chaff are getting separated, and we're hoping for the best, but not an easy business.

Beck Bamberger:

It's not. For anyone who's listening or wanting to know the title of this New York Times piece that you're mentioning here, Adam, it's called A Literary Stop on the Campaign Trail. It's all about Writer's Block, which is that LA reading series, and it's been around for like 25 years. 24 years, it says in the article, but oh, it's a great piece. Great piece. Highly recommend people check it out.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Thanks for that little part, Adam, on just the future journalism. You're one of the now, I'd say, many in this season of our podcast that are optimistic, I'd say. Not as pessimistic. Season one was quite pessimistic. I'm curious how this is changing and evolving, so kind of interesting to see.

Adam Popescu:

Well, we don't have a drink. We don't have a drink pouring right now, so like I said, I'm dry.

Beck Bamberger:

We could. What do you like to read? Whether it's journalism type, articles, outlets, et cetera, or just books?

Adam Popescu:

So I have a daily subscription to The Times, to The New York Times, which is-

Beck Bamberger:

It's the best.

Adam Popescu:

... it's exhausting, to be quite honest, to keep up, but I think it's very important, and I want to see. And I also like to see myself in the paper, and I save the copy, and I feel good, show my mom. I also have the Financial Times in print on the weekend. I think they're a fantastic publication, and I get The Economist.

Beck Bamberger:

Ooh.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

And do you read The Economist back to back every week, though?

Adam Popescu:

You know, it's another one that it almost feels like homework sometimes, and it's exhausting.

Beck Bamberger:

It is. I've been a subscriber for years, frankly, and my background's in economics, and I love econ, but my god. Yeah. It's hefty.

Adam Popescu:

Well, the thing about these other papers is they have a more European or global worldview that American papers don't have.

Beck Bamberger:

That's true.

Adam Popescu:

So The Economist has-

Beck Bamberger:

It's very global.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah. These are fantastic. I have, in fact, next to my bed, I have, if I don't read it after a few weeks, I'll go through the magazine and cut out some of the articles I want to read, but it is because of the nature of my work, I have to be up to date, and I have to be following, and I can read in print in a more deep way than if I went online. So I do have that.

Adam Popescu:

But for pleasure, I read a lot of books. I just read *The Kingdom and the Power*, which is by Gay Talese. It's already quite a bit dated, but it's about the history of *The New York Times*. It was written in the late 60s, and reading that book today, I mean, it could have been written yesterday. It's so fascinating about the politics-

Beck Bamberger:

Really?

Adam Popescu:

... the history, just the inner workings, a lot of the archetypes and the tropes and the narratives, you can see that today. And it's just, for me, it's fascinating. It's very much *Inside Baseball* to a degree.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay.

Adam Popescu:

And then I'm reading ... I'll tell you one more and then I'll shut up. I'm reading *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren, which is also another classic, and it's from ... I think it was written in the late 40s. I don't just read the book club stuff, although I do keep up to date with some of the current stuff.

Beck Bamberger:

No.

Adam Popescu:

I just read William Dalrymple's *The Anarchy*, which is about the British East India Company and the rise of India, which I find fascinating. There's not enough time in the day.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, there's not.

Adam Popescu:

But I do consider myself a bibliophile, and I do love to read.

Beck Bamberger:

It's great. I'm such a sucker myself. I just got *All the King's Men*, put it on my Audible there. Ooh, it's hefty. 20 hours.

Adam Popescu:



Well, watch the movie. The movie will just ... If you haven't seen it, it's another classic.

Beck Bamberger:

I will. Okay. Well, let's shift to our word association game. So I'm just going to give you a word, Adam, and you just tell me the first thing that comes to your mind. How about that?

Adam Popescu:

Are we going to edit it out if it's bad?

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, yes, we can edit.

Adam Popescu:

All right. Great.

Beck Bamberger:

Usually there's some surprises in here, so okay. Here we go. Food?

Adam Popescu:

More.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink?

Adam Popescu:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Adam Popescu:

Oh, good question. I have to redo that. After corona we'll talk about that one.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Okay. Okay. How about The New York Times?

Adam Popescu:

Tough.

Beck Bamberger:

Steven Spielberg?

Adam Popescu:

Humble.

Beck Bamberger:

Humble. Oh, isn't that refreshing? Dalai Lama.

Adam Popescu:

Rolex. He wears a Rolex.

Beck Bamberger:

What?

Adam Popescu:

He's full of contradictions. He's very playful. Very playful guy.

Beck Bamberger:

I heard he was. And when I listen to interviews and hear him on books and stuff, you could sense that joy that just is resonating out of him. It's just wonderful. But wow, would have never thought that.

Adam Popescu:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

How about freelance?

Adam Popescu:

Oof. Very tough.

Beck Bamberger:

That's a word. We'll take "oof."

Adam Popescu:

Yeah. "Oof" is right.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism.

Adam Popescu:

Exhausting.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch.

Adam Popescu:

Daily.

Beck Bamberger:

Inbox.

Adam Popescu:

Zero.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay. So that leads me to this next part, which is, how does your inbox look? Is it filled with pitches? Do you read every pitch? What happens in there?

Adam Popescu:

I have to have my inbox really clean or else I don't think I could be functional, is the real truth. I do have folders. You have to be, at least from my experience as a reporter, you have to be really, really disciplined and really know where everything is, because it's just things pile up super quick. So I don't really follow ... I don't get on email chains or newsletters. I try to respond as quickly in realtime as I can. One reason being, I want people to treat me that way, so I try to be respectful and return as fast as I can. And I do read, I would say, 90 something percent of emails and pitches.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. 90%? That's the highest percentage I've ever heard on this show.

Adam Popescu:

I think most people do. Even if they just scroll through, even if they don't respond and they're scrolling, they're making some kind of determinant, saying, "It's not important," or, "That's not worth my time." But if someone actually, if it's a form email and they just dropped your name in, or they just say, "Hi!!" With three exclamation points, and they just obviously don't know who the hell you are, then delete. But if they seem to be genuine and seem to put some time in, I'll respond, but it doesn't mean I'm not going to obviously be able to accommodate and actually write about lots of things, but I'll tell them that. I'll tell them, "Thank you," and, "I'm not able to take on new material," or some of these people end up becoming resources in the future. It's about building these connections.

Adam Popescu:

And I think the good ones, they don't take it personal. Sometimes very junior people will get flustered easily or not really know the way that the game is played, and they take it personal, and that's something that happens quite a bit, and you have to keep your cool, but I think from my perspective, the job of a good publicist, it's not to be the gatekeeper. It's to be the facilitator. You are trying to get the message of your client and you're trying to connect them with the reporter, and then you stand back. You can't be expecting to control the story, to shape it. You do your best. You do your best to put two fingers together, and you have to be a professional to know, in effect, your job is then done. And then if they need more of either side, you serve them. You don't get all inserting yourself into it, and depending on the level of access or what have you, that can be more challenging.

Beck Bamberger:

Do you get to zero every single day?

Adam Popescu:

Oh yeah. I'm at zero all day. Every day.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh my gosh. Wow. You're like email superstar, because I have not heard more than 90% of emails read, and then getting to box zero.

Adam Popescu:

I got one email that just popped up at 3:15.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

Adam Popescu:

I'll get to that, but so much of this stuff is time sensitive.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

I have to respond to this edit because the story's going up.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

It's running in print on Monday. It's Friday now.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

That's the whole thing. I can't afford to be ... When someone tells me that they're a freelancer, I often used to think, "Oh, that means you're probably not good enough to be on a paper or on staff somewhere, or that you don't really work." And that was my own judgment, because I've met a lot of people like that. And then I think to myself, "Oh, do people think that about me?" And it's quite easy to have imposter syndrome and to feel like you're not good enough.

Adam Popescu:

But I think the truth is, is that if you're freelancing on a consistent level, excuse me, and that's your whole income, no one's just giving it to you because they like you. I mean, you better work it, and you better ... You're always judging the last thing you did, and you can't afford to falter or not respond in

time, because then they move on. You have to be easy to work with in addition to being good and delivering, but otherwise-

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Wow. Well, on that note, we're going to play a Mad Lib, which is my favorite part, Adam, of doing these.

Adam Popescu:

I hope I'm fast enough for you over here.

Beck Bamberger:

No, sometimes people get a little stumped, so we'll see. But sometimes they are actually remarkably accurate, as some people have said. So let's see how this goes. How about a catch phrase? Just a general catch phrase?

Adam Popescu:

How about I'll give you a really cliché, corny one. "Do your best."

Beck Bamberger:

"Do your best"?

Adam Popescu:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Excellent. What about a journalist scare phrase?

Adam Popescu:

"Breaking news."

Beck Bamberger:

And then how about a buzzword in journalism that's positive?

Adam Popescu:

I'll give you a negative one.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay.

Adam Popescu:

"Layoffs."

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That would be one.

Adam Popescu:

See, my brain goes to negative before positive.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, that's all right. What about an adjective?

Adam Popescu:

How about I do this? I'm going to just read one off the front page that it's overused.

Beck Bamberger:

Perfect.

Adam Popescu:

Where was it? Over here. "Mild mannered." Talk about cliché.

Beck Bamberger:

"Mild mannered"?

Adam Popescu:

What does that even mean? That you're not yelling?

Beck Bamberger:

I don't know. Because if you're mannered, isn't that mild? Okay. Anyway, what about part of a pitch?

Adam Popescu:

"Here's the news peg."

Beck Bamberger:

"Here's the new peg."

Adam Popescu:

Geez. We sound like we're back in the 40s right here. "Here's the news peg."

Beck Bamberger:

What about an adjective?

Adam Popescu:

"Robust."

Beck Bamberger:

"Robust." And then a part of a pitch again?

Adam Popescu:

"Please respond."

Beck Bamberger:

"Please respond."

Adam Popescu:

That's a pretty pathetic one.

Beck Bamberger:

That is. Who puts that in a pitch? "Please respond"?

Adam Popescu:

No, come on. I don't know. Who would put that in a pitch.

Beck Bamberger:

I don't know, but that would be pretty funny. I'm going to try that next time. "Please respond."

Adam Popescu:

"Please respond." Let's see what your rate is on that one.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Adam Popescu:

Zero.

Beck Bamberger:

Amount of time.

Adam Popescu:

"Too much."

Beck Bamberger:

What about another adjective?

Adam Popescu:

"Fading."

Beck Bamberger:

What about singular noun?

Adam Popescu:

How about "dog"?

Beck Bamberger:

"Dog."

Adam Popescu:

A dog is a noun. I have a master's degree and I don't really know what a pronoun, adjective. These are tough questions.

Beck Bamberger:

And then a topic.

Adam Popescu:

You mean besides the bubble we're living in right now, that will still be extended forever?

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Yes.

Adam Popescu:

Here's a topic that I would like us to talk about more, or feel, and that's hopeful.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. A verb that ends in I-N-G?

Adam Popescu:

"Living."

Beck Bamberger:

And then just this last one, just a regular verb. Whatever verb comes to mind.

Adam Popescu:

I have to say "die" now.

Beck Bamberger:

What'd you say?

Adam Popescu:

I said "die."

Beck Bamberger:

"Die?" Oh my god.

Adam Popescu:



Yeah. [crosstalk 00:24:28] living and now I'm going to die. See, one to the other.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Okay. Okay. Yup. Yup. Yup. Okay. This is going to be definitely an interesting one. Here we go.

Adam Popescu:

It's Friday afternoon.

Beck Bamberger:

It is. It is. Thank god, actually. It's been a long week. Okay, here we go. Are you ready?

Adam Popescu:

I'm ready.

Beck Bamberger:

"To me, journalism is about doing your best."

Adam Popescu:

Oh, god.

Beck Bamberger:

"It consists of breaking news and layoffs on the daily. If a pitch has a mild mannered, 'here's the news peg' request, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a robust 'please respond,' you can expect no reply from me. If too much time goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not fading about it. The best stories always have a dog and are usually about hopefulness. The best way to reach me is by living, but you can also reach me by just dying."

Adam Popescu:

You know, there's some truth in that.

Beck Bamberger:

This is some truth. I think it's somewhat accurate. I do like, my favorite is, "The best stories have to do with the dog and are hopeful."

Adam Popescu:

I did recently profile Dog the Bounty Hunter.

Beck Bamberger:

See? Did that work well?

Adam Popescu:

Oh, come on. Dog the Bounty Hunter?

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. It probably was a record breaking, I imagine.

Adam Popescu:

He is a real special character. He's a real, again, complicated, but people love dogs.

Beck Bamberger:

Also true. Adam, thank you for being here today, drink or no drink. This was fun.

Adam Popescu:

Beck, thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

Appreciate it.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee With a Journalist, featuring Adam Popescu. The goal of our show is to give you an in depth look into tech industry's most well known and coveted tech journalists, and we hope you found today's episode insightful. If you haven't already, make sure to subscribe to our show on iTunes, Spotify, and everywhere else you enjoy listening to podcasts. We'll see you next week with an all new guest and even more insights. Until then, let's quit bitching about pitching and start great stories.