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Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, the podcast by OnePitch featuring well known journalists from the top US-based publications covering technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science and more. The goal of our show is to uncover the real person behind the real stories you love to read. We discussed their beat in news coverage, what their inbox looks like and a whole lot more. On today's show, we're joined by Ben Schiller, the managing editor for features and opinions at CoinDesk. Ben has over 20 years of experience in business and tech journalism, serving previous roles at Fast Company and Breaker Mag. Today, Ben dives into the three segments of CoinDesk's audience, is focused on feature articles and trend stories, why pitches must be topical and newsworthy, Breaker Mag's former furry mascot, and more. Let's listen in and hear more from then on today's show.

Beck Bamberger:

Hi, everyone. Welcome to coffee with a Journalist. Today, I'm super excited because any of you Bitcoin people, you're going to love this one. We have on Ben Schiller, who is a Brit turned American, as it's said in I think your LinkedIn or Twitter profile, and you are CoinDesk's managing editor and we have lots to talk about as it relates to everything alternative currency. So thank you, Ben, for being here. We're super excited.

Ben Schiller:

Thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, and not to curtail your title here, managing editor of features and opinion at CoinDesk, And there are many that float around on CoinDesk for all of you that are there. First off, Ben, you're usually based in New York city. Are you there now? Where are you in your COVID life?

Ben Schiller:

Yes. Since March, we've both been up here in the Hudson Valley with my wife and my dog Juliet, and we're trying to struggle through the quarantine like everyone else.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. We all are, and very few people who I talk to that are based in New York city are not in New York city right now. Is that by the way, your beautiful dog on your Twitter photo?

Ben Schiller:

It is. She's a border Collie mixed with a Labrador and she's the love of our life. Where I used to work at Breaker Magazine, she was a office mascot.

Beck Bamberger:

Aw, she's beautiful.

Ben Schiller:

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Unfortunately, we can't have her in the office anymore, but being at home is nice because you can hang out with the dogs and all that sort of thing.

Beck Bamberger:

What little garden of utopia she in, by the way, in this photo?

Ben Schiller:

I think that's right around the back of the garage.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay. Well, she looks like the happiest dog there ever was alive in that photo. So that's cute.

Ben Schiller:

She is a very happy thing. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it. I'm also enjoying all the COVID dogs right now and puppies that have exploded across America. I'm sure all of us can relate to that or see that. So anyway, go dogs. Well, let's talk about to start, and I know as a managing editor, it's a little bit different than sometimes just a reporter or writer, how you come up with stories that are going to show up on CoinDesk. We should probably even start with, for those who aren't too familiar, what is CoinDesk's focus? Let's start with that and then we'll talk about stories.

Ben Schiller:

Sure. So CoinDesk is by far the biggest site dedicated to blockchain and cryptocurrency technology. It's been around since 2013 and we're trying to, or we are covering the revolution in the financial industry related to digital assets. So it started obviously with Bitcoin, but as since gone off in thousands of different directions, both on the kind of anarchic side of things and also on the kind of highly corporate side of things. So it's interesting multi-varied revolution going on and we're excited to be covering all of it. We do that through a global roster of reporters. So we have people in Europe and Russia and Asia and lots of here in the US. We also increasingly have a multimedia division and podcasts, video, et cetera.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. It's quite the empire from a media standpoint for all those.

Ben Schiller:

It is. Yeah, it is. I think we're unusual maybe that we are a growing successful media company an industry that doesn't always have successful growing media companies.

Beck Bamberger:

Ooh. So let's talk about that for a second and of course, disclose only what you can, but why is that? Right now, is it alternative currencies really exploding or expanding right now amid COVID or what would you say?

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Ben Schiller:

Well, it has been an element of that. There's this retreat to digital and people are starting to use Bitcoin and other forms of digital assets to do things they might not have done were it not for COVID, but we have a successful events business, which helps to insulate the rest of the enterprise. So we're quite dependent on that. Then we have some resources from a founder as well who's very generous.

Beck Bamberger:

That's helpful. That's definitely helpful, the owner when they're backing there. Absolutely.

Ben Schiller:

Definitely.

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Beck Bamberger:

So let's go into the story making. As editor, kind of the role's a little bit different. You can talk about that. I know a couple of last pieces you wrote was on the Post-Trust Election and how you're hitting the 2020 campaign trail. You also had a new opinion section of the future of financial systems and how it's up for debate, et cetera. How do you guys decide what to write?

Ben Schiller:

First of all, we have an audience that we're trying to reach and that kind of is segmented into three different groups. There is a kind of core crypto audience coming out of the Bitcoin and Ethereum communities mainly, and that they've existed for a number of years and they've always read CoinDesk, but we're trying to also reach more of what we call a discovery audience. These are people who are maybe-

Beck Bamberger:

A bit curious.

Ben Schiller:

Yeah, definitely curious. That was good. Yeah. They've heard about digital currency. Maybe they've heard about Bitcoin, but they don't know a lot about it and this is a sort of notoriously tough subject to crack or to understand. So we're constantly trying to find those ways to reach people in a kind of relatable, easy to understand way because there has been a sense in the past of the crypto industry and of crypto media talking to itself all the time, and we want to break out of that bubble and reach new audiences, whether that's corporate audiences or more sort of mass market.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. So you're thinking of the audiences in mind. Especially now, is there a Zoom call you guys all get on once a week, every day or something to say like, "Okay. Here's the stories that are potential"? How do you guys discuss then, especially in your role, what actually turns into a published piece.

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Ben Schiller:

Okay. We do opinion, so we have a roster of columnists who send us pieces all the time, and then we have contributed pieces that come, a lot of them from PR people.

Beck Bamberger:

We're going to talk about that in a second. Yes, go ahead.

Ben Schiller:

They send us pieces and then we work on them together, but they have to meet a certain kind of standard that we have. It has to have an opinion rather than just being kind of a sales talk for something. So that's one side of things. Then more on the feature side, to features are profiles of people or longer in depth trans stories. So I can't really tell you how we decide those. They either come from writers, they come from me or they come from other editors who decide what we should cover. But we're trying to find a balance between editors deciding what is important and listening to the various channels that we have as to what people out there think is important and we find a balance between those two things.

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Beck Bamberger:

Now, what channels are you listening to and paying attention to?

Ben Schiller:

Obviously, we look at our traffic and what people enjoy reading. We look at our social channels and see what people are responding to on there. Crypto media is interesting because traditionally, there's been a number of sort of... The numbers of stories that we kind of hit again and again and again, and which are associated with Bitcoin and blockchain technology, and everyone kind of knows what that is, is about the price going up or the price going down or something being hacked or sort of basic stories like that. But we also want to find other types of story that are more human, they're more about how people are adopting and using Bitcoin and blockchain technology because that's really how we're going to move from this being still a rather small niche to being a more of a mass market phenomenon.

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Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You mentioned just then about receiving the PR pitches for the pieces that get published on the opinion section. So now, let's talk about your inbox and how you sort through those. How does your inbox look on a week by week basis?

Ben Schiller:

Well, like everyone else's inbox, it looks quite messy and full of stuff.

Beck Bamberger:

You're not an inbox zero? We have a couple of hardcore dedicated people.

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Ben Schiller:

We try, but I think it's impossible to keep up.

Beck Bamberger:

I was going to say.

Ben Schiller:

I've tried to answer this question before, and I don't really know how to answer it. It needs to be either topical. I fit with a... Have a news pack or it needs to be something that's trending. So for instance, we ran an op ed yesterday about tech talk, which is obviously very much in the news. It's a part of this emerging fight between the US and China. So it's something that's very topical and new-sy. So I think generally, we're looking for pitches that have that sort of currency.

Beck Bamberger:

No pun intended.

Ben Schiller:

No pun intended. I think we're just looking for things that are outside the usual suspects, as well as I say, there are these kind of cliches of crypto, **Bitcoin journalism and we're always looking to kind of get outside of those cliches and do new things and reach new audiences and make people think, really.**

Beck Bamberger:

So when you're in that inbox that is messy, as you're saying, do you actually read every single pitch that comes in? Do you do the mass delete thing? How does someone stand out?

Ben Schiller:

They stand out by having an original idea, having something that's new and it hasn't been covered before. So we're always looking for things that break the mold.

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Beck Bamberger:

Got it. So is subject line really important for you before you open it? Or are you like, "I don't really care. I open everything"? Some people, for example, that I've talked to, they will open every single email, which I find fascinating. Then there's like the hardcore deleters where if they don't know you, you get deleted.

Ben Schiller:

It is very frustrating to receive a PR pitch where people don't explain in the first line who they are and what their kind of perspective is because you just think, "Well, this might be a good story, but if I don't know where it's coming from, if I don't have any sort of perspective or context around it, then how am I supposed to really make a decision?" It's like when you don't know someone it's hard to trust them, you know? So I think almost as important as the pitch itself is to really clarify what your credentials are and what your perspective is. What are you trying to sell? What are you trying to do? Nothing more annoying

than having to go to the seventh paragraph to find out what the story is really about or where it's coming from or what the motivation is for the story.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I have to say, not that I'm receiving pitches, but people want stuff for whatever reasons for me and then it's exactly what you're describing. Seven paragraphs, I hear your whole sob story or whatever your story is and then it's like, "Oh, can you get on the call with me?" And I'm like, "Okay, I would have loved that on line one." "Can you get on a call with me? I'm so and so this is why."

Ben Schiller:

I think sometimes having said that it's good to have a news hook on your pitch, often we get pitches that are a little bit forced. Something will happen in the news. There'll be some tragedy or wildfire or something, and people will try and make a linkage between their product or their service and this thing like, "Now more than ever because of the fire in California, we need toilet rolls." So that's kind of awkward, I think.

Beck Bamberger:

What's the worst you've ever gotten, just so we know?

Ben Schiller:

I don't think I would like to embarrass anyone but sometimes it's really, really kind of bad, you know?

Beck Bamberger:

I don't know what came through your inbox, but I can absolutely see, "Black lives matter. That's why we got to have Bitcoin," or some like-

Ben Schiller:

Exactly. Yeah. Some things are best as left on their own. Black lives matter is Black lives matter. There's no sort of product opportunity there.

Beck Bamberger:

That's right. Oh God. Okay. So I think that distills for publicist, what they need to know here have; just upfront, make it clear, tell them what you want and you've got to have a really distinct opinion.

Ben Schiller:

And I think you have to be relatable as well. I think we're all very attuned these days to people who are sincere in what they say and people are not so sincere. So I think don't claim through something you're not. Don't don't claim that you're offering something that you can't and just be straightforward and upfront. Yeah.

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Beck Bamberger:

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Do you think that authenticity has... Is that something more recent with COVID or is that just been an increasing, where we've been going just on social media and media in general?

Ben Schiller:

I think so. I think people are very attuned to what is and isn't bullshit, so you shouldn't forget that. I think we're all looking for relationships that we can have with people that are real, that are not just mediated through the internet or mediated through sort of business cliché. So it's refreshing when you talk to someone who's a human being.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, it is.

Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to learn more about unique ways OnePitch helps connect journalists with brands and sources? Head to OnePitch.co for information about how we're helping each side save time and connect more effectively. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Let's play real quick here, Ben, a short word association game if we can, and you just say the first word that comes out of your mind. How about that?

Ben Schiller:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Are you ready?

Ben Schiller:

Ready?

Beck Bamberger:

Food.

Ben Schiller:

Drink.

Beck Bamberger:

Damn, Ben. The next one is drink. Okay. What would you say for drink?

Ben Schiller:

Cocktail.

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Beck Bamberger:

Hobby.

Ben Schiller:

Cricket.

Beck Bamberger:

Blockchain.

Ben Schiller:

Crypto.

Beck Bamberger:

New York city,

Ben Schiller:

Los Angeles.

Beck Bamberger:

London.

Ben Schiller:

Hell hole. That was the first thing that came into my head.

Beck Bamberger:

That's a true Brit right there. Okay. Democracy.

Ben Schiller:

Fascism.

Beck Bamberger:

Crypto.

Ben Schiller:

The future.

Beck Bamberger:

Bitcoin.

Ben Schiller:

The origin story.

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Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Features.

Ben Schiller:

Editor.

Beck Bamberger:

Economy.

Ben Schiller:

Disaster.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism.

Ben Schiller:

Hard work.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch.

Ben Schiller:

Yes, please.

Beck Bamberger:

That's the first time I've heard that on this entire show. Inbox.

Ben Schiller:

Outbox.

Beck Bamberger:

Outbox. Nice. Okay. Ben, what are you reading right now?

Ben Schiller:

I do read a lot of crypto stuff generally. Brilliant book about the great crash, 1929 crash, Galbraith. So this sort of classic history.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, you have a history background by the way, a pretty deep one.

Ben Schiller:

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A little bit. Yeah. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Do you love to read history?

Ben Schiller:

I do. Yeah. I think like a lot of people, I don't read as much as I'd like to and I think there's something about staring at the internet all day that makes you like books less. Maybe I felt I'd have less time for reading, but yeah. Yeah, liberating history. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm looking here, "history of nationalism and a cold war Russia, Iran, central Europe, US." Damn. That was from the London School of Economics and political science. Man, I would've thought you would have said like, "Oh yeah, I read this history blog every day and this is my thing." Do you also... Sometimes we ask on here is just, okay. Maybe if consuming vast amounts of reading material is kind of out of the picture a little bit, is there anything you love to watch, especially in your COVID life right now? Any good shows or any podcasts, obviously besides this one, that you listen to?

Ben Schiller:

This is a good one. We have a lot of podcasts on CoinDesk, so I listen to those quite a bit. Yeah, and some other good ones out there about crypto. One we like is Nathaniel Whitmore's The Breakdown where he interviews a lot of famous people in this industry and a lot of kind of people that are connected to the world of crypto, but not maybe exactly in crypto, which I think is quite interesting. So I'd recommend that one, The Breakdown by Nathaniel Whitmore.

Beck Bamberger:

Is there a book by the way, so you were saying, as the audience, you want to incorporate more people that aren't the hardcore original people who have been in cryptocurrency from a long time, like those super, let's say, super nerdy people really up on their stuff and more maybe the curious, the coin curious people. Are there any books you'd recommend or any resources besides CoinDesk that you're like, "Oh yeah, you need to read this book. It's like the Bible,"? Is there such a thing in this industry?

Ben Schiller:

Absolutely. Not talk too much of our own book, but our chief content officer, Michael Casey, is a very well regarded journalist of 20 years plus at The Wall Street Journal. He wrote a book with a colleague from The Wall Street Journal called, "Trust Machine," which is widely acknowledged as a good primer on the whole subject of the blockchain.

Beck Bamberger:

Good. Okay. Well, and by the way, hopefully, you'll have a book out soon.

Ben Schiller:

Maybe one day.

Beck Bamberger:

I don't usually ask this, but what do you think of there's... It seems like there's, I don't want to say a trend, but there's activity around well-regarded journalists publishing books on the topic they've extensively covered for years or maybe got really down in the rabbit hole with. What do you think about that?

Ben Schiller:

Well, I think it's great that people write books obviously, but I have to say that I think a lot of journalists feel like they need to write a book for their resume or for their career as much as for actually needing to write book. I think there's a tendency to kind of have a big feature in a magazine and you think, "Well, I'll pat this out and write 200 pages on it." I don't really see the point in that often. I think if you're going to write a book, then you might as well write about something that is more longer lasting and a bit less sort of ephemeral than just a feature story. I think particularly in this industry, things like the, "Truth Machine," by Michael Casey aside, I think these books have a very short shelf life.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I'm feeling just from the people I talked to particularly, pressure. There's pressure now in the market of like, "Well, you got to do a book. You got to." That's how you get your next a carrot.

Ben Schiller:

Exactly.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I'm like, "God, isn't it enough you guys are doing already?" It's kind of what I think, but anyway. Speaking of, what do you think about the future of journalism?

Ben Schiller:

I thin obviously, it's worrying. I think if you look at our industry crypto, there are a number of very high profile technologists who really don't believe in journalism for the same reason they don't believe in currency basically that they don't want intermediaries in the way of the flow of information. So in the same way that Bitcoin has argued that they want a self sovereign currency, a lot of technologists in our space argue that they want a kind of self sovereign form of information and journalism. So I think that I kind of worry about that as a journalist because I think we're being disintermediated all the time by the internet and by social media and by new technology, including blockchain. So I think journalists have to be wary and you can't take anything for granted.

Ben Schiller:

Going forward, I think you have to constantly rescale and retool and constantly be looking at the market to see how you can fit in. So the days of starting in a job and having a job for life are obviously over, I would say. Having said that I do think there are businesses out there that have shown that you can make money and be successful like Axios, for instance. They have a massive audience now and they went off and did this strange newsletter first model, which some people thought was crazy at the time. Why don't

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they have a website? Sort of thing. But I think they've really proven that if you innovate and you really cater to what people want rather than what you think people should need, then you can be successful.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, you've stood the test of time a bit, Ben, because you've been 20 years now in this industry. If you had to go back to your college self, would you say, "Yeah, do this. Do this career."

Ben Schiller:

Yeah, I think so. I think if you believe in journalism, if you believe in telling stories and getting to the truth, then what else are you going to do? This is how you do that. You know? But I think if I was talking to my 20 year old self or I was talking to a 20 year old now, I would definitely caution them to be wary. I think one thing I think about a lot is that it's easier to be a specialist in something like crypto blockchain than it is to be a generalist journalist because obviously, there are a lot of people out there who can write about lots of things without knowing a single thing.

Ben Schiller:

But I think these days, it's better to know a lot about a single thing and then know a bit about some other things. The reason why I got into crypto blockchain journalism myself a few years ago was because I frankly, saw an opportunity to have a role in this sort of emerging space. There weren't a lot of people who understood this subject and there certainly weren't a lot of people writing in any kind of way that was kind of comprehensible and engaging. So there was definitely an opportunity there to take a niche in the market.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That was when you were editor in chief at Breaker Mag, right?

Ben Schiller:

That's right. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Ben Schiller:

So Breaker was a short lift, but interesting, I think, startup dedicated more to the kind of culture and social impact of blockchain and less about the kind of financial implications, which is more of what we do now with the CoinDesk.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, Ben, I would love to play our final thing here, which is a mads lib. Have you played one lightly in your COVID life?

Ben Schiller:

I have not, but I'm looking forward to.

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Beck Bamberger:

Let's play. Yeah, sometimes they're shockingly accurate too. So let's see what happens for yours. Okay. What say, catchphrase, any catch phrase.

Ben Schiller:

Here's looking at you, kid.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, that's a good one. A scare phrase used in journalism.

Ben Schiller:

You're all going to die. I don't know.

Beck Bamberger:

I like where this is going already. Okay. An empowering journalism buzzword.

Ben Schiller:

I like to say to people, to writers, have fun with. I think-

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Ben Schiller:

As a phrase, I think sometimes we're so sort of focused on getting the facts right and getting the story right, which is obviously really, really important that I think we forget to have fun with with our own sort of-

Beck Bamberger:

And the creativity of it.

Ben Schiller:

Yeah, the creativity with our own voice and with our own sort of personality. I think it's fun to get to that stage in an article or some other media where you feel like you've mastered the topic enough that you can kind of break out of the mold of it and kind of see around it.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). What about an adjective?

Ben Schiller:

Sprightly.

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Beck Bamberger:

Sprightly. I love it. Part of a pitch.

Ben Schiller:

This story will do well, or this story will excite your audience or something.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay. Another adjective?

Ben Schiller:

Fun.

Beck Bamberger:

And then another part of a pitch.

Ben Schiller:

I can't think of anything. Sorry.

Beck Bamberger:

That's okay. I'm actually going to put that down. Okay. Amount of time.

Ben Schiller:

10 minutes.

Beck Bamberger:

And then what about another adjective?

Ben Schiller:

Luckily.

Beck Bamberger:

And then what about a singular noun?

Ben Schiller:

Football.

Beck Bamberger:

Topic, what the topic.

Ben Schiller:

Revolution.

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Beck Bamberger:

Revolution. Yes. And then a verb ending in -ing.

Ben Schiller:

Saving.

Beck Bamberger:

And then lastly, another verb. Any verb.

Ben Schiller:

Christen.

Beck Bamberger:

Christen.

Ben Schiller:

I don't know. This is very random. Isn't it?

Beck Bamberger:

It is. This is so juicy. Okay. Here we go. Here we go. To me, journalism is about, here's looking at you, kid. It consists of you're all going to die, but also have fun with it on the daily. If a pitch has a sprightly, this story will excite your audience phrase. I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a fun, I really can't think of anything, you can expect no reply from me. If 10 minutes goes by and you don't see an email back for me, you can just assume I'm not feeling lucky about it. The best stories have football and are usually about revolutions. The best way to reach me is by saving to me, but you can also christen me. I kind of like this, Ben.

Ben Schiller:

That doesn't make any sense at all.

Beck Bamberger:

That's the fun of it.

Ben Schiller:

It's very clever how you put it together. That was good.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, Ben, thank you so much for spending some time with us on here.

Ben Schiller:

Well, thanks for having me. I hope I've been mutually helpful.

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Beck Bamberger:

Oh, you have been, you have been. Now, we know your dog as well, and we know how to get an opinion piece in the opinion section and not to make it just boring as all hell. It's been great. Thank you, Ben.

Ben Schiller:

Thanks very much. Have a good weekend.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of coffee with a Journalist featuring Ben Schiller from CoinDesk. If you like our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google podcasts, and leave us a review if you've enjoyed what you've heard. For more information about OnePitch, head to our website at OnePitch.co and see the unique ways for helping journalists and public relations professionals start great stories. We'll be back next week with an all new guests and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.