

Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, a podcast by OnePitch, featuring the tech industry's most well-known journalists. 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, and a whole lot more. On today's show, we're joined by Eugene Kim, Chief Tech Correspondent at Business Insider. Eugene specializes in covering Amazon and e-commerce. He's worked for a number of well-known news outlets, including The Information, CNBC, and Fortune Magazine Korea. On the show, Eugene talks about his unique approach to covering one of the most profitable tech companies, his interest in seeking out data-driven stories, why pitches should be short and to the point, and lots more. Let's dive into today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Hi everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. Sometimes we drink coffee. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes a lot of times we just drink whatever the heck we want. Because this has done all times of the day and today we have on Eugene Kim, great reporter. I'm so happy to have you here, now back at Business Insider, and now also with a very fancy title, which we're going to talk about chief tech correspondent. Thank you for being here, Eugene.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

Are you drinking any coffee?

Eugene Kim:

Not now. I'm trying to cut down.

Beck Bamberger:

Not now? Okay. Do you drink coffee by the way?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Morning only? A couple of times a day or what's the deal with that?

Eugene Kim:

Used to be two or three times a day, trying to reduce.

Beck Bamberger:

Caffeine?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah. I quit drinking by the way.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey, I don't drink at all, so welcome to the club.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah. Cool.

Beck Bamberger:

Has that been hard?

Eugene Kim:

Initially it was. But the benefits are far-

Beck Bamberger:

Immense.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Clarity of mind, all those great things.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Well, for those who don't know you, I mentioned you're back at Business Insider. You previously were there as a senior tech reporter. You've also been at CNBC. You've been at The Information, Fortune in the Korea edition. You've been pretty much at the top publications, which is quite impressive. And a lot of what you've covered and still cover is Amazon. And then e-commerce, but Amazon, that's your jam.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah. It's a-

Beck Bamberger:

What keeps you interested, inspired in Amazon?

Eugene Kim:

I mean, it's run by arguably the most interesting CEO of our time.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

Not just that, it's just, it's one of the largest companies in the world. It's in almost every imaginable business you could think of. Every day there's something new.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Now, before we got recording on this, you had mentioned that he's pretty, Jeff Bezos is pretty press shy. We're going to talk about how you get stories in a second, but is that a, would you say a barrier at all? Do you got to dig even deeper? Because it's hard to find?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. He only does one or two interviews every year.

Beck Bamberger:

God.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. My expectations of getting to talk to him is very low. But that means, I have to look for other channels to find stories. And since Amazon is in so many different businesses and they have, I think over 800,000 employees now, so it's, I guess, it's compared to other companies, there's a more kind of variety of stories to look into. So yeah. I mean, it's a fun company to follow.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm sure it's not boring ever.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Could you tell us, for the audience just listening here, what's the distinction, if there is one, you tell us, of reporter or senior reporter versus chief tech correspondent? Is there a difference there? I've never seen chief.

Eugene Kim:

So BI has different titles based on your level of experience, I think. And we have a lot of young reporters who may have more of a junior title. And when BI brought me back in late last year they said they could offer me a more senior title and yeah, with that, there's, I think, four or five different other chief correspondents at BI. Like I'm not the only one, but with that title, the expectation is also different. You're not expected to just write commodity news.

Beck Bamberger:

You got a specialty at that point.

Eugene Kim:

Right, right. You have to kind of live up to the title in some ways.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yes. No pressure. No pressure. Well, let's talk about what the heck's in your inbox. Now this might be interesting because while you, again, you tell us, since you're so niche focused, although your coverage does include e-commerce, what does your inbox look like of pitches?

Eugene Kim:

Actually I've noticed I'm getting less pitches actually compared to a few years ago. I think it's, maybe it's because of my reputation of being very laser focused on one company or I haven't really written a lot about stories based on press releases. So maybe no one's just reaching out to me, but it used to be like four or five years ago when I first started, my inbox would fill within an hour. I would get like 50, 60 emails, but now it's like, even overnight, I think I get maybe less than 20.

Beck Bamberger:

A day? Or a week?

Eugene Kim:

No, no, no. A day, maybe like, I don't know, 50.

Beck Bamberger:

Currently you still get 50?

Eugene Kim:

In the past it used to be like in a couple hours, but now.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, that's kind of manageable-ish.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. Yeah. So I'm pretty religious about keeping inbox zero.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, you're part of that club.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, we've got a few in that club, mm-hmm (affirmative). Ryan Mack is also inbox zero club over at BuzzFeed. Like religiously, like he's on the call with us, or he's on the recording, and he's deleting emails at the same time, while we're talking.

Eugene Kim:

It's the first tab on my Google Chrome. And I'm constantly looking over to make sure it's at zero.

Beck Bamberger:

Got it. So then with those remaining pitches that you do get, and since you want to get the box to zero, do you do any filing of the pitches? Do you ever go back to them?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. I keep my inbox very simple. It's either starred or not starred. And if it's starred, I would probably go back through it at the end of the day or take a note and make sure I respond to those guys.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, within a day?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, I mean, because I'm also constantly looking for story ideas and if the pitch is good enough, there's a chance that I could turn it into a story within 24 hours.

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Beck Bamberger:

Tell us more about the story ideas you're looking for. So is it someone saying, "Hey, I've got a little tip on Amazon" or "I've got a trend about it." Like, does it have to be Amazon focused?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. Most likely. Nine out of 10 it's Amazon related, but it doesn't always have to be an exclusive or a scoop. I think if it's unique data point about Amazon's marketplace, very good chance I could write about it.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, one Amazon agency that works with a lot of Amazon sellers reached out with a pretty interesting data point, a couple charts. And I thought that was pretty interesting. It wasn't reported elsewhere. So, we got some comments from their VP and turned it into a quick post.

Beck Bamberger:

Got it.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. What if someone has anything, because you touched on this now, that's an agency that's handling Amazon, but if it's more in the realm of just e-commerce in general, I can see you don't have a lot of stuff up there, so are you really, is it 99? 95% Amazon?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, but I'm also trying to expand my coverage area a little bit.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay.

Eugene Kim:

Just because there's more competition. Walmart, they're becoming big. Shopify.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

Just in general, because of COVID a lot more people are shopping online, and there's huge readership demand about e-commerce in general. How to sell online or what to buy. So yeah, I'm always interested in hearing about new ideas.

Beck Bamberger:

Look at that everybody. Interested in hearing more. Do you, for the subject line, like if I don't know you, I mean, I know you now because we're talking, but if I don't know you and I'm a publicist, I want to get you to respond. Is it all about the subject line? What should the subject line look like?

Eugene Kim:

I think it's pretty, I mean, I make sure to read every email.

Beck Bamberger:

You read every email?

Eugene Kim:

I mean...

Beck Bamberger:

You skim, you skim it.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow, still that is so impressive and zero.

Eugene Kim:  
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:  
Wow. You must be a machine. I would love to see this in person.

Eugene Kim:  
But when you open the email, you can kind of tell whether this is spam or not. [crosstalk 00:09:55].

Beck Bamberger:  
Right away, yeah.

Eugene Kim:  
And even if it's not spam, you can tell if this is tailored for me or if it's kind of copy and paste.

Beck Bamberger:  
Mm-hmm (affirmative), blasted.

Eugene Kim:  
Yeah. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:  
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:  
And I think usually the good ones are actually shorter. They're straight to the point maybe they have bullet points.

Beck Bamberger:  
Okay, bullet points welcomed. Yes, good, wow. Inbox zero and you read/skim every email. Amazing. Oh amazing. Why don't we play a quick word association game. One of our favorite things. So the first, I'm going to give you a word and then you come out with the very first thing you think of. Are you ready?

Eugene Kim:  
Yeah, sure.

Beck Bamberger:  
Let's do it. Food.

Eugene Kim:  
Pizza.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink.

Eugene Kim:

Kombucha.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby.

Eugene Kim:

Basketball.

Beck Bamberger:

Amazon.

Eugene Kim:

Jeff Bezos.

Beck Bamberger:

Korea.

Eugene Kim:

Food.

Beck Bamberger:

Food. God. Yes, isn't that right? Oh man. I'm a fan. Okay. Bay area.

Eugene Kim:

Expensive.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). E-commerce.

Eugene Kim:

Growing

Beck Bamberger:

Jeff Bezos.

Eugene Kim:

Rich.

Beck Bamberger:

I'll say. COVID-19



Eugene Kim:

E-commerce.

Beck Bamberger:

Prime.

Eugene Kim:

Membership.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Journalism

Eugene Kim:

Background.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch.

Eugene Kim:

Desk-side meeting.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, we'll talk about that in a second. Inbox.

Eugene Kim:

Zero.

Beck Bamberger:

That's right. Damn straight. I like that. So you just said, "Desk side meeting," which of course isn't happening right now because of COVID. But do you have you done those in the past?

Eugene Kim:

No.

Beck Bamberger:

[crosstalk 00:11:39] If someone sent you a email to ask that, you'd actually, what do you do?

Eugene Kim:

No, I usually just ignore them. I mean, it doesn't make sense.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. No, it doesn't. Do you ever, if you got an email saying, if someone said, "Hey, I have a hot tip on Amazon" or something, would you ever go to coffee? Go to a... Well, not... A kombucha, not a drink, but

a kombucha, would you, are you one of those people who's like, "Yeah, I'll meet somebody for 15 minutes."

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. Yeah. That's totally definitely fine. But most of my meetings take place over the phone, even with the sources.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), got it. Got it. Okay. What are you reading right now?

Eugene Kim:

I'm actually reading two books. I recently started reading the Bible.

Beck Bamberger:

The Bible. A classic.

Eugene Kim:

Right. I've been getting a lot of questions from my kids about God and the world so...

Beck Bamberger:

Wow, wait, how old are your kids?

Eugene Kim:

Five and seven.

Beck Bamberger:

Five and seven. Oh, so they can definitely articulate and have a conversation of sorts. Do you guys go to church or something? Or like how did they get the notion of [crosstalk 00:12:47].

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, my parents are Christian actually. So I kind of took them to Korean church and because they also teach Korean at church.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, okay.

Eugene Kim:

We used to go every once in a while. I don't think I'm too religious yet-

Beck Bamberger:

Yet.

Eugene Kim:

... but I get a lot of questions about characters in the Bible and history. So I thought I might as well. I never read the Bible. It's like 15 minutes per day. So it's pretty fun. It's interesting.

Beck Bamberger:

You're definitely the first person who said "The Bible." People are like, "Barron's, Wall Street Journal, Modern Retail." Whatever. Anything else you read? Like what else is just like a journalist to be up on what other people are doing? What else are you reading?

Eugene Kim:

So, I try to read a lot of business, nonfiction books, obviously. James Stewart, those types of stories, books are really good. More recently, I'm a huge sports fan, so I've been reading a lot of basketball and baseball books.

Beck Bamberger:

What's your favorite teams?

Eugene Kim:

I was born in Jersey and went to college in New York. So I'm a die hard New York Knicks fan.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, do you miss being out there?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. I used to go back like once a year, but I don't think it's going to happen this year.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

But yeah, I mean the city, I totally miss it.

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Beck Bamberger:

About when you're crafting a story, Eugene, we like to talk about this part, I'm like, the actual making of a story. How does it happen? Are you, for example, reading something and you go, "Oh, I haven't seen that yet." Or do you get a little tip in your inbox and you go, "Okay, let me follow that." Or are you digging, digging, digging around, I don't know, whatever part of the internet you're looking at and you find something and you're like, "Aha." How does that work for you? And what also is the time? Obviously you're posting stuff, you can get it up in 24 hours, but are you working ever on pieces that take weeks to deliver?

Eugene Kim:

Yes. I mean the sort of the crux of every story is, the foundation has to be reporting obviously. You just talk to a lot of people and usually that's how you get story ideas. You can't have exclusive scoops every

week. So to diversify the channels... I go through a lot of public documents that includes earning statements, for example. Every quarter there's a lot of data included in, in that quarterly statement. And I try to make sure I get at least one or two stories out of it just based on-

Beck Bamberger:

What's said.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, unusual changes in a line item or their cash balance or whatever.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

Our readers really like those type of stories. They don't have to be CPA, CFA level, deep dive into the statements. But as long as it's new and original, I think a lot of readers find it useful. For Amazon I also talk to a lot of sellers and partners that work with Amazon. Just because Amazon is such a big company, they have a lot of partners that they rely on. And in those transactions between Amazon and those partners, there's always something that's happening. It might be something controversial, it might be something good. A lot of these things, they don't announce it. It's not public information. So if you talk to a lot of people, a lot of sellers, you'll find something interesting to write about.

Beck Bamberger:

So would you even say, or does this happen, where you're like, "Okay, don't have a story. Let me talk to eight people. Let me spend my whole morning and just getting on the phones." Like, does that happen?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. I block out a certain time of day, everyday, just to make sure I reach out to cold emails and LinkedIn messages. Almost every day [crosstalk 00:17:06].

Beck Bamberger:

Oh my, you're doing some outbound, cold.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

Eugene Kim:

In some way I feel like a sales person.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, you do. Will you get on the phone with me, I want to talk to you. Yeah, yeah. Are people usually... What's the response for that?

Eugene Kim:

I would say the hit rate, like the success rate is, maybe if you reach out to a hundred people, you're lucky to get one useful.

Beck Bamberger:

One?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. I mean, that's my expectation.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. 1% success. Well, you said useful. So I'm sure you get a handful of people that respond, but then you're like, "Not helpful."

Eugene Kim:

Right, exactly. Like you can tell by "Hi," right? When you first get on the phone, like if this person's going to be opening up or not.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). When you get on the phone with people, do you get a sense immediately if they're media trained or not? Are you like, "Oh, wait a second. This person is polished up" or you're just like, "Oh, this person's going to let it rip."

Eugene Kim:

It depends. I mean, if it's like executive level, like startup CEO, those people are very, very good. But if it's more like rank and file or engineer, they're kind of nervous at first and there's kind of a back and forth to make sure, on my end, to make sure this person is not trying to-

Beck Bamberger:

Dig something out.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, exactly. So, yeah. At first it's kind of careful.

Beck Bamberger:

Do you think that's kind of funny too? People get nervous around you?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, I mean, I think that's why people generally don't want to have coffee with me. I usually talk over the phone with most of the people because they just don't want to be seen being in the same place with me.

Beck Bamberger:

There's a little anonymity to that too. If you're just on the phone with like, "He can't see me talking to you, so..."

Eugene Kim:

Right, right.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Oh, that's funny. People get nervous. Yeah. Well, I get it. Given your a chief, okay? Officer here, person who's on the business side, or I'd be like, "Oh God, who is this fancy person?" Well, speaking of, since you are now at this chief level, Eugene, you've been in journalism for quite some time. I was looking at your LinkedIn bit. And as we mentioned, you were at Fortune, you were at Business Insider, you're back again. You're at The Information for a brief moment, you were with CNBC for about two and a half years. What do you think the future of journalism looks like?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, that's... Tough question. And I don't know if I'm smart enough to make predictions, but there's definitely the need and the demand for news publications that can consistently provide good stories. And I think in my position, I'm basically betting on a model, sort of a hybrid model, of ad-based, subscription-based and also like, events generating revenue to support the work that we do.

Beck Bamberger:

Does it make you nervous? You're like, "Wow, we got to have events going. We got to have subscriptions, everything."

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, I mean, everything that's been going on in our industry in the past month or two, it kind of wakes you up, right?

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

A lot of job cuts, furloughs. I think one thing that I can say is, as a reporter, the future is going to become more competitive. And if you can't consistently add value to your publication and to your readers, your future as a reporter is not going to be so bright.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Kim:

I mean, by value, you could be scoop and exclusive content, but it could also be fun, firsthand account of selling on Amazon, right? Or a very smart analysis, or it could be an opinionated piece. But if you can't find that niche and keep providing that value to your readers, yeah, you're going to get replaced.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. No, makes sense. Do you ever talk to folks who still approach you, maybe college students or anything who go, "Oh wow. Can you help me get a job in there? Can you get me an internship?" Like, are people still eager to get into journalism from what you've seen?

Eugene Kim:

I've been contacted by very few people out of college who were asking me about it. So I think there's definitely, there's thousands of kids graduating with a journalism degree every year. But I remember talking to one of the high-profile like VCs investors and they told me there is no better time to get into journalism than now, right? It's the time to disrupt it and come up with a new idea that can change the whole landscape. So, maybe it's a good time to get in.

Beck Bamberger:

You're also one of the first people who've said that Eugene. A lot of people have said always, "Oh, even despite how crazy it is and layoffs and the thing of it, it's like, I'd still do it. I'd still want to go to it. I'd tell my old self the same thing. And I'm here to make a stand." But you're the first definitely who said, "Oh yeah, I've heard through the grapevine, people are like, 'Hey this is the best time ever.'" Well, that's a first on this podcast.

Eugene Kim:

That's good.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it. That's good. Maybe it's changing. The first season too, we had really pessimistic responses. And then this season it's been really positive.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Maybe it's changing.

Eugene Kim:

That's good to hear. [crosstalk 00:22:50].

Beck Bamberger:

Like you should get in this industry. Let's go.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. Well now we'll do, Eugene, one of my favorite parts, which is our fun Mad Lib, which usually works out to be somewhat true once we read it back. So I'm going to give you a list of things. I'm going to write out your one word, two word responses, and then I'll read you the whole entire paragraph. Let us do it. I love it. Here we go. What's a catch phrase, just a general catch phrase?

Eugene Kim:

What goes around, comes around.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, what about a journalist scare phrase?

Eugene Kim:

Correction.

Beck Bamberger:

Correction, yeah. And then what about an empowering journalism buzzword?

Eugene Kim:

Off record.

Beck Bamberger:

Great. Adjective.

Eugene Kim:

Pretty.

Beck Bamberger:

Part of a pitch.

Eugene Kim:

Under embargo.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. What about another adjective?

Eugene Kim:

Black.

Beck Bamberger:

And then part of a pitch.

Eugene Kim:

Look forward to your feedback.



Beck Bamberger:

Look forward to your feedback. By the way, I'm assuming you mean black the color because that is an adjective. Not Black capital B.

Eugene Kim:

Right, right, right, right, right.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Just clarifying for everybody. Okay. Amount of time?

Eugene Kim:

60 seconds.

Beck Bamberger:

Another adjective?

Eugene Kim:

Fast.

Beck Bamberger:

And then, a couple more, singular noun.

Eugene Kim:

Bottle.

Beck Bamberger:

Bottle. And a topic?

Eugene Kim:

Journalism.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism, yeah. Last two. A verb ending in I-N-G?

Eugene Kim:

Running.

Beck Bamberger:

Running. And then just a regular verb? Any one.

Eugene Kim:

Eat.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Are you ready?

Eugene Kim:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Here we are. To me, tech journalism is what goes around, comes around. It consists of corrections and off records on the daily. If a pitch has a pretty under embargo subject, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a black look forward or a look forward to your feedback statement, you can expect no reply from me. If 60 seconds goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not fast about it. The best stories always have a bottle and are usually about journalism. The best way to reach me is running it to me. Or you can also eat me. It kind of fits.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. That's good.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, thank you so much for being on today. This was really fun.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah, likewise. Yeah, thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

Good luck with the ever evolving Amazon coverage.

Eugene Kim:

Yeah. Thank you.

Beck Bamberger:

And go get a job in journalism.

Eugene Kim:

All right.

Beck Bamberger:

Do it.

Eugene Kim:

That's right.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Eugene Kim from Business Insider. If you like our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, and Google Podcasts. To learn more about OnePitch, head to our website at [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) and learn about the unique ways we're helping journalists and public relations professionals start great stories. We'll be back next week with an all new guest and even more insights about the tech journalists you want to learn more about.