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Jered Martin:

Hello, and 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 Joel Shannon, a reporter for USA Today's Nation Now team. Joel covers trending news stories, including weather, health, and national news. And recently has covered stories about COVID-19. On the episode, Joel shares about the unique way Now News works with local news publications, why pitching him might be tough, how he works with beat writers from USA Today, and more. Let's hear more from Joel on today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. Today we have on Joel Shannon, who's going to delight us with his knowledge of San Diego, hopefully, because he's based down here. Like me, Joel, which is great. And all the stuff that you do for USA Today, which is amazing. I'm excited to chat with you. Are you drinking anything right now? Since it's late in the afternoon?

Joel Shannon:

Not right now. I was hoping to have some Peet's today. So maybe that'll happen.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That's a good choice. I like to go to Blue Bottle.

Joel Shannon:

Oh yeah. Yeah. That's good. Good.

Beck Bamberger:

First off, for folks who don't know, because your title is a little bit unusual for those who perhaps don't know. So you're writing specifically for the Now section for USA Today, and you are a multi-platform journalist. What does that mean?

Joel Shannon:

I think that's something I put on just as a stock thing when I first started on. But yeah, I'm kind of a Now reporter. When I write, I tend to do a lot of Now stories which are quick trending stories and related breaking news too. So we look at generally Now stories a little bit different than breaking. Breaking news is the newsier stuff, that's the shootings, fires, that kind of stuff. That's the big news of the moment. Now stories tend to be trendier things. They often are a little lighter, but it's a little bit less time sensitive as far as breaking right now. So I started off mainly doing the trending stories. It's the kind of stuff we like to do is murder hornets. I did that story. It's to balance out the news of the day.

Joel Shannon:

So yeah, we try to entertain and delight, is what we like to do, and whenever we can, we do that. So yeah, so I do the trending stuff and then also breaking. So a lot of coronavirus stuff. Yeah. And then that's the writing side. And then also part of the Now team is also working with our network properties. So our several hundred network papers that are around the country, the daily newspapers. We have got them in

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Phoenix, Detroit, all that through Ganette. And so we're looking to see what they have that's trendy, what newsy, and I'm involved in the team that will bring that over. We'll edit the stories for national and post that on our site too. So it's a little bit of everything from the news side, but yeah, that's what I do.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Well that's a lot. Is your inbox any vaster with pitches?

Joel Shannon:

Especially since coronavirus, it's a lot. It's a lot to go through. Yeah. It's just a struggle to get to the stuff that is from editors and all that, especially if you have a couple of days off, so yeah. And there's a lot in the inbox.

Beck Bamberger:

How do you keep it all organized?

Joel Shannon:

I wish I had a better system. I just go through and just scan and I try to stay on top of it in the moment, checking it enough that I know if there's something important. And then, when I sign on at the beginning of the day, just go through and purge anything that's just not relevant. It seems like somewhere along the way I've gotten put on several distro lists that send me a lot of things that aren't really in what I'm doing. And I'm a tough journalist to pitch to because I don't have a beat that I cover. So I might write a story on murder hornets, but I'm not the murder hornet reporter. So all of a sudden now I'm getting all of these incremental pitches about murder hornets.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh no.

Joel Shannon:

I get a lot of pitches that really are in my wheelhouse, mainly because the stories I'm writing, if I'm picking a story, it's going to be one that is trending at the moment and high interest. And so I'll go to my pitches sometimes for background or whatever, but it's hard to pitch to me, unfortunately.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. So speaking of, have you written at all, in relatively recent times, a story from a pitch?

Joel Shannon:

Not recently that I can remember. I do remember going back and using some things that were pitched to me within a story I was writing already. In the past, when I've done that, it's usually an editor has gotten in someone that... It's been pitched to someone who is more on the beat. And so they say, this is good. I cover this topic and this is a good thing. I don't have the bandwidth to do it. Or this seems like it could be trendy and it gets passed back to the Now side of things. So a lot of times that'll be studies or survey kind of things. I remember doing several of those where a business will do a survey that's often newsy topic. And then we'll cover that in some way. That's the one I can remember.

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Beck Bamberger:

God. So you're quite unpredictable?

Joel Shannon:

Just because . So, editor might say something about, "Hey, there's this murder hornet thing." And usually, unless it's a direct assignment, that's not quite enough for me to say, I'm interested in writing that. Usually I need to see it's trending on Twitter or, in theory, possibly I've gotten 15 pitches about that. So I want to hear about it from multiple sources and that tells me this is a buzzy topic. So yeah, it's an interesting process.

Beck Bamberger:

Speaking of, because you have to be so in the now, as you just mentioned, how do you know the stories you need to do?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. I mean, I think it's that there's a little bit of intuition about knowing that we had a similar story do well, we know that this is something that's really important to our audience. So there's a part of that, where sometimes there's a story I wrote this weekend that did really well. And it was, I think I saw at one place, it was something off our coronavirus party and a doctor's warning off of that. And I knew that that was something that was high interest. And so prioritized that instantly. But often it's more, I'm very skeptical of stories and trends because it takes a little bit of time to report out a story and you want to make sure that it's one that is going to be worth your time.

Joel Shannon:

So often it is looking for a topic to reach you in multiple ways. And that's usually a very good indicator that this is something people care about. And that can come from a lot of things. It can come from searching. We use tools to mine social media to see what people are talking about. So seeing a trend there.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. So you're looking for Google trends, social media trends?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. What competitors have. If you start seeing that everyone has the story and we don't, that's a big sign that we missed something. It's just all of those things and it's very situational and definitely, when new people come onto the team, it's tough to tell them it's an art, not a science. You can't just say instantly, "Oh, if you see this trending on Twitter, we should definitely write it." Because it depends on the topic. It depends on lots of different things. And often it's a cost benefit of how long is this story going to take to report out, to verify and all that versus how much interest there can be?

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah. I never thought about the balance of that. Of, I cover trends. I cover what's now, but I have to have the time in order to do the story and to do it well. Ooh.

Joel Shannon:

That's one of the reasons why I like that story about the coronavirus party, because I saw, as local media was covering it, I saw that it looked like a statement from the doctor directly that they were reporting off of. So we have now a first person, even though it's public out there, it's the authority saying this thing. I don't have to trust a local media source or whatever. I know I've got it directly from the source. And I was able to reach out and get the video directly so that didn't take very long. And it got us a trending story that was relevant to readers. So that's the balance. You start getting into trending stories that are tougher to verify, or things that even might be tough to track down the source, or we have to trust local media on the reporting. That's a bigger time commitment to look into.

Beck Bamberger:

Are you stressed with this? Just weighing between those two things and then you have to be monitoring the art of it, of what is trending, what is relevant? What will be the most... I mean, I know that's every journalist's concern of course, but it's very different if your beat is Amazon and e-commerce, versus Now. You cover Now, that's what you cover.

Joel Shannon:

Yeah, I would say, I think as you get used to it, you find a balance and definitely it's less stressful as you get used to it. I remember when I came on and felt a little overwhelmed and talked to people that have been doing it for two or three years, and they're like, "Yeah, you get in the flow." And you do. And you know what stories are the ones that are going to cause you more stress and which ones are the ones that are not. So you get that kind of thing. And there's a lot of support. There's a lot of Now people, there's a lot of Now editor's. Very good about having support and being able to talk through things. Knowing that there's someone that's got your back is a big help.

Beck Bamberger:

How are you guys working now together? I mean, obviously the whole staff is everywhere, but particularly for COVID they're dispersed. So no one's going into an actual office. Are you guys on calls every day?

Joel Shannon:

I think the biggest thing we found helpful is calls. I know I work in the middle of the day, so I work a little bit with dayside people and nightside people and there's two calls a day that we do with different groups in that time period. And those check-ins are super helpful. And then, at least how I work and how the night shift tends to work, is more of in between those. It's a lot of we use Teams, but Slack kind of thing, just staying in touch there. And then obviously calls and all that as needed. But the big thing that we found is really helpful, even before COVID, was doing these check-ins. Sometimes with a big group sometimes with a small group, but especially the small groups are very helpful. What everyone's doing and what you're struggling with and all that and talk it out as a group for 20 or 30 minutes. That really pulls the crew together.

Beck Bamberger:

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That's nice. Get on a call, "What's the struggle? What are you working with? What's happening? Not working."

Jered Martin:

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Beck Bamberger:

Okay. I want to play, Joel, a word association game, if you're down for it? Are you ready?

Joel Shannon:

Sure.

Beck Bamberger:

You just say the first thing that comes to your mind. Here we go. Food.

Joel Shannon:

Food, hot dogs. I'm going to have those later.

Beck Bamberger:

Hot dogs? I mean, it is summer. Okay.

Joel Shannon:

Hey, I looked at the New York Times best hot dog list or something. I'm going to go out and grab one.

Beck Bamberger:

Really?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

You're the first hot dog answer I've heard. Okay. Let's go, drink.

Joel Shannon:

Beer. I love San Diego for IPAs. I liked IPAs before I came out here, and this is the IPA capital, so yeah, that's pretty great.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby.

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Joel Shannon:

Hobby. Maybe it's off of what I just was saying, but grilling, I love grilling. At our apartment complex we have a nice grill by the pool. That's open now if you make a reservation.

Beck Bamberger:

Good.

Joel Shannon:

Yeah, I love to grill. I'm not sure how good I am at it, but it's fun.

Beck Bamberger:

Got it. That's very summery. Well, and you're in San Diego, you could do it pretty much year round.

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Present day.

Joel Shannon:

COVID.

Beck Bamberger:

PR.

Joel Shannon:

Maybe, I don't know why this word popped into my mind because I think it's...

Beck Bamberger:

You got to tell us.

Joel Shannon:

I don't think it's fair, but I think sometimes I just think of the frustrating things I'll have. This doesn't tend to happen a lot. It just kind of, it's great when I can work with someone in PR that's really responsive and always frustrating when I'm working on a Now story, as we've talked about, tight deadlines, unfairly tight deadlines on anyone in PR, I know that. I feel like, as many journalists do, if you're a jerk being like, "I got to write this story in two hours, I need to talk to an expert." And it's frustrating on my end when that's not possible, but totally understandable because that's a crazy ask. So yeah, just that struggle of, I know I'm asking a lot from my PR contacts, but it's always frustrating when it doesn't come through. So that's a long word association.

Beck Bamberger:

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No, that's fine. Sometimes they go into combos like that. What about San Diego?

Joel Shannon:

I just love San Diego. I've been there two years and I mean, just the weather's great. I just love the vibe here. We don't have a dog, but I just love that dogs are everywhere here. I don't know. It just lifts your spirits every time you go anywhere. The food's great. But when I was back on the East coast, just never really connected with the beaches and they were quite a ways to get to from where I was in central Pennsylvania. And now just being 20 minutes from the beach, it's just great to go there and take a walk and unwind. So I love San Diego.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm with you. I'm a native, so that's fantastic. Okay. Journalism.

Joel Shannon:

Journalism. Hard. I don't know. It's a lot of work. It's very rewarding. I love, especially, what I'm doing, where I feel like the stories I write, I often feel very good about how they're truthful, fair, accurate, all of that good stuff. And that's hard to do. And then also just the fact that they're of interest to a lot of people and help support the business. It's a hard thing to do, but it's very rewarding that part of it.

Beck Bamberger:

What about pitch?

Joel Shannon:

Pitch? I think, I mean, just because of what I said before, just the overwhelming number of things I get in my inbox. It's just frustrating and overwhelming. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

How many emails would you say you get a day? Let's narrow it. How many pitches do you get a day?

Joel Shannon:

And it's mostly pitches. I would say 150 to 200 emails a day.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

Joel Shannon:

And they definitely come in batches. I think 9:00 AM East coast time, I just get hit with 30 emails every day.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow.

Joel Shannon:

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I remember thinking, hearing about that when I started at other places. Hearing people talk about cleaning out their inbox.

Beck Bamberger:

You were like, "Ha ha, no way."

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. I totally understand why I'm on these lists and everything, but there's just a lot of stuff that isn't relevant to me.

Beck Bamberger:

I don't know how you stay sane. Is your inbox, by the way, do you get it to zero? Are you one of those people?

Joel Shannon:

Oh no, no, no, no. I gave up on that long time ago. My inbox zero is just getting through all the things since my last shift. So I know, once I get back to unread stuff, I'm like, "Oh, okay. I'm caught up."

Beck Bamberger:

Well, what are you reading? Anything?

Joel Shannon:

I wish I read more. I've tried a couple of times. I tried to get back into that, but I think I tend to just read a lot of news, which is totally understandable. I'm watching Hamilton. I just finally did that.

Beck Bamberger:

Did you love it?

Joel Shannon:

I did. I did. Yeah. It's something I'd heard about for quite a while and didn't know a ton about it, other than I know people loved it. And when I watched it, I was like, "Oh, I get it." It's quite good. But yeah. I mean, it's just a lot of news. I have so many subscriptions to newspapers now too, that that's what I do. So it's four or five subscriptions I've got.

Beck Bamberger:

Which ones, which ones? Tell us, we got to know.

Joel Shannon:

New York Times and Washington Post I've had for quite a while. Since moving out here, got the UT and LA Times. I think those are the four I'm subscribed to that are daily newspapers. And then-

Beck Bamberger:



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Wow. The Unions Tribune. What are you, one of the last 300 people that read that? I grew up reading it, trust me.

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. So I like their coronavirus dashboard. I got that up on my phone to check in every now and again.

Beck Bamberger:

Good. Okay. Well now I want to talk about the future of journalism, what you think. I'm not going to tell you what I've been hearing this whole season. Let's see what you say, Joel, but what do you think? What do you think about the future of journalism?

Joel Shannon:

I do think I'm seeing more and more success with subscriber stuff, paywalls shifting back in that direction. We always are looking at ways of elevating our coverage. Just to own my team, the move we've made and not entirely shifted philosophies, but we've started doing more in-depth reporting than maybe we would have two years ago. So there's definitely a move from more original reporting stuff that you can't get elsewhere, quality journalism. And with that, the subscription dollars. So I think subscriptions in some form is what I see being a trend in the future. But yeah, I mean, there's a bunch of different ways you can take the future of journalism for sure.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, are you then optimistic about it?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. I mean, I'm optimistic in that I think that trend, if it does pan out, is a good trend. I mean, it's just good for society. I'm optimistic in that that's a better trend than the other way of less quality and faster stories and all that contributing to the noise. I feel like if the trend of elevating more original reporting, all that becomes dominant, I think that's good for society and good for journalism for sure.

Beck Bamberger:

Well, you're another optimistic person I've had on this season, not first season, but definitely this season, which is refreshing, especially now. I've been doing all these in the middle of COVID and it's good.

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. I mean, I think you see this COVID crisis has shown that there's such value in what we do. I mean, I've done one or two of these myself, but we've got a whole team that's doing fact checks and they're just... People crave that because there's so much misinformation out there. And so I think we've got a partnership with Facebook that allows us to do that, but that kind of thing, it takes a lot of work to do fact checks. And they're so valuable, especially when there's just so much misinformation out there from every source. So, I mean, just that, it tells you that there's a tremendous appetite for clarity and knowledge when there's confusion. So that's been positive to see.

Beck Bamberger:

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Oh, we can have a whole other conversation about that, but we don't have time for that today, Joel. We're going to do, instead, our last little part here, which is our fun journalists Madlibs. So I will guide you through this and then I will read you back what we get. Sound good?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. Sounds good.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. First off, what's just a catch phrase.

Joel Shannon:

Catchphrase. Democracy dies in directness. That's a good one.

Beck Bamberger:

You're the second person who's used that one. What about a scare phrase that journalists hear?

Joel Shannon:

Correction in all caps.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. What about an empowering buzzword that journalists here?

Joel Shannon:

Helpful. I don't know. Helpful's not a very good answer, but that's the first thing that popped in my mind.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Got you. What about just an adjective.

Joel Shannon:

Quickly.

Beck Bamberger:

Quickly, and then part of a pitch.

Joel Shannon:

New study, new biotech study. How's that?

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Great. Then another adjective.

Joel Shannon:

Slowly.

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Beck Bamberger:

Slowly. What about another part of a pitch?

Joel Shannon:

Maybe we'll just do the anatomy of a pitch, like contact information.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Contact info. Yep. Amount of time.

Joel Shannon:

Two hours.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Another adjective.

Joel Shannon:

Wonderfully.

Beck Bamberger:

Wonderfully. And then a singular noun.

Joel Shannon:

Joel.

Beck Bamberger:

You?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah, me. Why not?

Beck Bamberger:

Excellent. Okay. Topic.

Joel Shannon:

Topic, murder hornets.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, this is going to be a good one. Okay. And then a verb ending in ING.

Joel Shannon:

Running.

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Beck Bamberger:

And then what about just a regular, whatever verb.

Joel Shannon:

Cry.

Beck Bamberger:

Cry. Okay. All right. Are you ready, Joel? I'm going to read this back.

Joel Shannon:

I don't know, maybe.

Beck Bamberger:

It's going to be good. Okay. To me, journalism is democracy dying in the dark. It consists of all caps, corrections and helpful information on the daily.

Beck Bamberger:

If a pitch has a quick new study, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if the pitch has a slow contact information section, you can expect no reply from me. If two hours goes by and you don't hear an email back from me, you can just assume I am not wonderful about it. The best stories always have my name and are usually about murder hornets. And the best way to reach me is by running it to me. But you can also cry over to me.

Joel Shannon:

Funny. It's good stuff.

Beck Bamberger:

That was a good one. That was a good one. How do you feel? A little bit accurate? A little bit accurate?

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. There's some truth in there for sure.

Beck Bamberger:

No, there's some truth for sure. I love it. They're surprisingly accurate, we have found. Well, Joel, thank you for being on today. This was fun.

Joel Shannon:

Yeah. Thank you for having me. This is fun.

Jered Martin:

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