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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 stories you love to read. We discuss their beat and news coverage, what their inbox looks like, and a whole lot more.

Jered Martin:

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. Today, Beck sits with Natasha Mascarenhas, reporter at TechCrunch.

Jered Martin:

Natasha tells us about her goal of talking to one to three founders per week, the types of stories typically written at TechCrunch, her favorite newsletters to read each morning and a whole lot more. Here's Beck and Natasha on today's episode of Coffee with the Journalist.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Everybody today on Coffee with the Journalist, we have the wonderful, the incredible Natasha, let me make sure I get your last name right, Mascarenhas.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Mascarenhas is perfect.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Currently a reporter at TechCrunch newly, previously from Crunchbase News. We've chatted before, Natasha. I'm so happy you're here and especially in this unique time of reporting and journalism overall, thank you for being here.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Of course. Yes. I'm glad we're able to find a way to record remotely.

Rebecca Bamberger:

It's great.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, to catch up again.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yeah. Are you drinking any coffee right now?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I'm not, I am drinking water. I am trying to use the work from home as a force to make me drink more water, so I'm on my fourth cup of the day of water. Really proud about that.

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Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh dang, good, good. Do you track it or have one of those apps or anything or are you just like, "I'm drinking water?"

Natasha Mascarenhas:

It's definitely just becoming a competition between roommates at this point.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, nice. Well, you cover, as folks probably know, overall venture capital startups, all things related to Silicon Valley and the wild world that it is. We like to talk about a certain number of topics here on this podcast. One that starts with really, how do you come up with, how do you make an incredible story? So can you tell us just where do you start from the idea all the way to the article being published, how that comes about?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Totally. So I feel like most of my favorite story ideas have come from basically walking around and having a conversation. And the conversation is probably not going to be what the story idea ends up being, but something about a turn of phrase or a billboard inspires me to pick up a story. So-

Rebecca Bamberger:

A billboard?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. So-

Rebecca Bamberger:

Incredible.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

One example was I went on a walk with a VC and we were just talking about the state of life and we passed on one of the many billboards in San Francisco. We ended up talking for 20 minutes about how Facebook and Google ads has become an overcrowded market and how billboards are a way to do untraditional advertising these days. That ended up being a story for Crunchbase News. And I feel like many journalists, I feel like the best stories are the ones that we're not hitched directly, but the ones we stumble across serendipitously.

Rebecca Bamberger:

So is it when you're on walks, when you're in the shower, when you're feeding your pet, is there when that moment of those stories happening happen for you in a set way?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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I think coffee meetings have helped a ton to just take a second and remind myself that even if we're talking for an upcoming funding round or a new job move, but then putting the notebook away and being like, "Okay, candidly, what do you feel is being under reported on? Or what's one thing you think is missing from the conversation right now?" I think that's when the gems always came up. I did the series for a while where I would talk to people in tech about everything other than tech. And that ended up, weirdly enough, leading itself into stories about loneliness and culture and stuff like that.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Nice. So next question. Of course people want to know, do you do coffees ever with journalists? Oh, excuse me, obviously with journalists, but with PR people, publicists, who would you actually meet with I guess is a good question?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. So it's something that obviously can get tiring and overwhelming. So I try to do one to three a week. Minimum of one but I do try and talk to PR people, founders and venture capitalists. I love talking to founders because I think that they're the craziest one of the bunch, they're giving up a lot of work life balance. So it is really great to touch base with them before they announce their first funding round, which is often when I get to write about them. And then I do like working with PR people. I'm not one of those journalists. So I do like working with PR people.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, how refreshing. That's good. So speaking of that ties into then next thing we like to talk about, which is just your inbox. I mean, what does it actually look like? Do you have hundreds of stories hanging out in there? Do you read every pitch? What would you say?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. So, recently I feel like I get roughly 700 to 900 emails a week. It's been a lot. Maybe it's because everyone's remote at the moment and they have more time to send emails. And-

Rebecca Bamberger:

Are those just the pitches or is that your aggregate number?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

That is my aggregate number.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Sometimes it's follow ups for... I think, let's say 65, 70% are pitches. So I don't click through every single email. I scan through every page. And if it's one by someone I know, I'll click on it. Or if it has a headline slash first sentence that feels like it wasn't written by a robot, then I definitely click into it.

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Rebecca Bamberger:

Good. Good. Yep.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, I mean I think that I try and get myself to refresh my email before I sleep and then once in the morning as and then during lunch. But during the day I don't get to be on my email as much. So the best way to contact me has ended up being my Twitter DMs.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh. Okay. So I've not heard this before. So you, sounds like you have set hours and parameters around in which you check that inbox. You're not on it all the time.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Not all the time. I think that's because... I stole this from a previous colleague of mine, Jason Rally. He was like, "I just don't check my email period." And I was like, "Well I would love to do that." But I mean I do if I have a follow-up that I'm waiting to hear, if I need to set up a meeting with someone for a breaking news story, I'll have it open. But once I get lost in a story or lost in breaking news, it can be at least three or four hours before I check my email.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Wow. Okay. So that's probably how you keep the sanity.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Definitely. Definitely. I mean-

Rebecca Bamberger:

Because some people I know are just refreshing, refreshing, and they're just getting all the pings and go, "Oh my God."

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. No, it's been overwhelming. It's been overwhelming, especially due to just so much happening in our world right now. I mean, obviously it's pervasive in every aspect of our life. So I get why people are sharing at this point. But it is hard to figure out what is something that's worth a story and what's not.

Rebecca Bamberger:

So then with those, when you go into that block, okay great, it's lunch time, you look into it, you're like, "Oh look at this, 100 new pitches, okay." What do you do with those? You archive? You click on the ones you think that are not from the robot, but what?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. Totally. So I mark a start if it's a story that I am working on currently and we'll circle back so I don't forget to include this in a story. So then when I write that story I can be like... I mean this just happened

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where I had gotten a comment from an EdTech startup. I saw the email at a time that I wasn't working on the story. So I just started so I could go back to it eventually because sometimes I can't remember every single name of every single startup.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah, of course.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. And then the other thing I do is I'll respond if I know that this is something that interests me pretty broadly. So then once I have a time to brainstorm or find a way to fit that pitch in some way into a bigger story I'm working on, I can just go to my sent folder, type in the keyword and find the pitches that I was excited about at one point.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Gotcha. So it doesn't sound like there's a secret folder.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

No, no secret folder. I wish I was that organized. I did ask my coworker Danny, how he handles his sourcing and he mentioned Airtable. So I'm working on setting that up right now. I-

Rebecca Bamberger:

That's pretty advanced though. I never heard someone having an Airtable thing, but I guess for your sources if you really want to keep that on track.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Exactly. So I was like, "That's not a bad idea." I will keep you updated on how that goes. I want to be that organized. So let's see.

Rebecca Bamberger:

You got to have some chops for Airtable too, but I'm sure it can be done. Interesting. Okay.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, totally.

Rebecca Bamberger:

I like that. So moving on from just then the pitches and what you're seeing. Since you've been recently new, I'd say, at TechCrunch and you're figuring out your beat, your focus and so forth. And I think this happens for a lot of folks when they get into a new role at a new media outlet and it's still up in the air. What's your advice for folks who want to pitch you, giving you something that actually would be relevant as you navigate and hone in on your actual beat or maybe more what you'll be focused on?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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Totally. So the good thing for journalists but probably be the hard thing for people pitching is that, I think at TechCrunch there is no one that's super tied to one beat. There are people that specialize and you see that with automotives or cybersecurity, but a lot of people are generalists. So that does make pitching a little bit more difficult. So that's number one.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

But number two, the best way to pitch me, I think right now is something that's not going to change about my job, is that I'll be reporting on seed and early stage startups and how they work, how they grow, fail and tracking the next big companies before they get bigger.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Explore them.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Gotcha.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Before they land that first partnership. And so I think that, one I really enjoy talking to founders.

Rebecca Bamberger:

As you said.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

At that stage especially, because I think that they are raw and able to share the playbook at that point more than someone who's the CEO of Slack Can.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yes, yes.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. I think that that's something that's not going to go away as hearing the trials and tribulations of growing your seed startup.

Rebecca Bamberger:

And you probably get more of that when you're sitting down with them for a coffee, as you said, you're going to loosen up perhaps.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, definitely.

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Rebecca Bamberger:

Telling you more or go on a walk with you, look at billboards.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, exactly.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yeah. I like that. Well, let's play a word association game Natasha. This is very simple. This is very simple. Just first word that comes out. You just tell us what it is. Are you ready?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yes.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay. Food.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Pie.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, that sounds good right now, doesn't it?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

That sounds ideal right now. It's funny when we were recording this and it just sounds right on a Friday.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay. Drink.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Water.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh yes. Hobby.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Sleep.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh yeah. I'm liking these Natasha, keep going. EdTech.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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SMART.

Rebecca Bamberger:
Funding rounds.

Natasha Mascarenhas:
Tiring.

Rebecca Bamberger:
VCs.

Natasha Mascarenhas:
Different.

Rebecca Bamberger:
Bay area.

Natasha Mascarenhas:
Diverse.

Rebecca Bamberger:
Remote work.

Natasha Mascarenhas:
Extra.

Rebecca Bamberger:
Slack.

Natasha Mascarenhas:
Helpful.

Rebecca Bamberger:
2020.

Natasha Mascarenhas:
Hard.

Rebecca Bamberger:
Yeah. Seriously. Journalism.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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Honorable.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, that's... Pitch.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Crazy.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Inbox.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Unmanageable.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Although you have a system somewhat in place Natasha, I got to hand it to you. This is working perhaps. Okay. What are you reading right now? And even watching, let's just get into all the content.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Okay. Well, I guess from a personal side or professional side?

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yeah. Any side. We'd like to know everything.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

So I'm part of a book club with a couple of my friends here and in different states, and we recently use Twitch to do our book club so we're not giving up on it. I'm reading Homegoing and it's about... It's historical fiction and it's, I don't know, I thought it's really beautiful. It's really sad. So I'm trying to accept happier, optimistic stories after this one. But it shows how the slave trade... How inequality existed then, exists now in so many different ways. And yeah, just reminds me a lot of the different privileges I have. So that book is really humbling.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Tell us again what it is. Homebound?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

It's called Homegoing.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, Homegoing.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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Yes. I can't pronounce the author's name, so I'm not going to butcher it, but it is the most [inaudible 00:12:46] Homegoing that's ever [inaudible 00:12:47].

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yes. It is. Y-A-A G-Y-A-S-I. Yeah, I'm on the same page with you on that. Oh, The New Yorker reviewed it a couple of years ago too.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. And the author's from Berkeley.

Rebecca Bamberger:

A sprawling tale of a family's split between Africa and America. I'll put that on my list. Okay. What else? And even on the daily, what do you read to consume on the daily?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. To consume on the daily, I read a couple of newsletters every single day.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yes. Tell us.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I read the Axios newsletters. They have the Pro Rata and then AM and PM and I think those are really helpful. I think Fortune has a really great newsletter as well. I believe Paulina has moved on from Fortune.

Rebecca Bamberger:

She has.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. So I'm making myself read her new gig, The Profile.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, I love it. Every Sunday. It's my first thing I read.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Amazing, yeah. I mean that's definitely something that I want to get great at. Ever since I started journalism, profiles were this really exciting and honestly I think it's a big... It's a lot of pressure, but it's really great thing to be able to do, like write a great profile that's well-rounded. So I'm going to read it selfishly and I'm excited to see how much she grows there. It's awesome.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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I live on Substack. I have a Substack newsletter I read, my colleague Alex [WelHolmesy's 00:14:14] letter a lot as well. He doesn't post regularly, but when he does post... I always like reading people that have their really professional writing and then get a chance at reading their close to home words as well.

Rebecca Bamberger:

And for those who just don't know what Substack... I'm just looking up to verbatim give you what it says. "Substack makes it simple for a writer to start an email newsletter that makes money from subscriptions." So you can easily publish it, do a blog, all that good stuff.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yes.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yes. Nice. Okay. And then do you typically read just everything happening on TechCrunch too, just to see what your colleagues are doing and all that?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. So I read TechCrunch a lot. I also, obviously Techmeme, I'm subscribed to the notifications. So whenever a story is Techmemed, I get a Twitter notification. So I make sure I read those stories as well. And I mean thankfully, I'm working with people that are all obsessed with their jobs as well. So there's a lot of story and link sharing that happens in Slack and convo.

Rebecca Bamberger:

How crazy is it in Slack for TechCrunch? Are you guys just blowing each other up all day?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I had to be removed from the coronavirus channel because I was just getting distracted. But I had one week in between leaving Crunchbase News and joining TechCrunch and during that one week I missed... I felt so uninformed just from not being part of Slacker. So I'm very much welcoming it.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Good. What do you think the future of journalism looks like?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Oh, I think the future of journalism, and this isn't a new idea or something that I can trademark, but I do see that these ideas of individual writers will be the big trend we see that attract subscribers.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Kind of like the chef. The chef was nobody 10 years ago. And then all these shows came out. Now chefs are icons and celebrities.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

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Exactly. And while journalism has never in my head been something that I'm going to turn into being a celebrity or a single force in an showish or in a garish way, I do think that that's a really great thing to see happening because it shows publications wherever they are 20 years from now, if you're a good journalist now and keep doing great work, your loyal audience isn't going anywhere.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

And I think just from having a Substack, which is this independent platform, you rank and these subscribers who aren't getting you from TechCrunch, aren't getting you from Crunchbase and aren't getting you from Twitter, but it's just you and them, and that's the only barrier between them. And I see that being a lot more common as time goes on.

Rebecca Bamberger:

So you're bullish I'd say.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, sure. We'll [inaudible 00:16:55].

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yeah. Good. I'm hearing a lot more positive remarks on this one by the way.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Oh really? What are you hearing?

Rebecca Bamberger:

In the past I've heard, "All things are shutting down and I don't know if I do go into it again, but it's so rewarding and we're going to have to figure out how local pubs make it, is it going to be a hybrid nonprofit model..." Various things from that like how will they survive? It's only recently and actually a couple conversations I've had this week where it's like yeah, the new celebrity journalists and what this can mean and how important it is for democracy and this type of stuff. So it seems like the mood overall is bullish.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I think it's really a privilege to be able to write for tech because I think tech also... If your coverage leans towards tech, you have a natural scrappiness in your day to day. It's not something that I ever experienced before. Before I was reporting on tech, I was at the Boston Globe and San Francisco Chronicle and those were great institutions and loved them. But it wasn't until I joined a tech blog where I was like, "Oh, this is how to really get in the trenches with this market." And I guess it gave me a lot of hope for journalism, not just being dead, but growing in different ways.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh, that's good. Okay, Natasha. Now, the moment you may be waiting for, is a little Mad Lib game. So I'm going to give you the phrase or the word or whatever, and then I'll fill it out and then we're going to read it back. Now interestingly, sometimes they're very accurate.

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Natasha Mascarenhas:

Amazing. Okay, let's see what happens.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay, let's try it. Okay, so first off, a catch phrase, just any catch phrase.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Never say never.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay. A journalism scare phrase.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Don't use Oxford commas.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Oh yeah. Oh God. How about an empowering journalism buzzword?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Scoop.

Rebecca Bamberger:

There you go. What about an adjective?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Tireless.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Tireless. And then what about a part of a pitch.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Action statement.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Action statement. Then another adjective.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Grumpy.

Rebecca Bamberger:

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You are on it today. Some people are like, "Oh, I don't know." I'm like, "It's just an adjective." Okay. Another part of a pitch.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I guess I don't know if this is the right specification, but the intro or the hook that gets you.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay. Hook. Amount of time.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Three months.

Rebecca Bamberger:

What about another adjective?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Hardworking.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Singular noun.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

School.

Rebecca Bamberger:

School. And then what about a topic?

Natasha Mascarenhas:

The future of work.

Rebecca Bamberger:

A verb ending in I-N-G.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Flipping.

Rebecca Bamberger:

And then another verb.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Running.

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Rebecca Bamberger:

Okay. Running. All right. Are you ready? I'm going to read it back.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I'm ready for it.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Let's do it. Let's do it. Let's do it. Let's do it. Okay. Here we go. To me, tech journalism is never say never. It consists of not using the Oxford comma and scoops on the daily. If a pitch has a tireless action statement, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if the pitch has a grumpy hook, you can expect no reply from me. If three months goes by and you don't hear or see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not hard working about that topic. The best stories always have schools and are usually about the future of work. The best way to reach me is of course by sleeping to me, but you could also run over to me.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

I love it. I love it.

Rebecca Bamberger:

It was great. It was great. A little cloggy sometimes, but it's good.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

It worked weirdly well, the only edit I have is maybe not three months then I'll take it back. Give me one month and then you can totally bother me for remembering and then I'll just say yes or no.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Love it. Well, Natasha, thank you so much for being on today. This has been fun on a long Friday. Oh my gosh.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yes. We did it though and-

Rebecca Bamberger:

And now people know where to find you. They know they can find you on Twitter. They know you'll be reading the profile on Sunday. Shout out to Paulina. And also get on Substack.

Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah. These are the perfect takeaways.

Rebecca Bamberger:

I love it. Well, have a good weekend and thanks for being on again.

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Natasha Mascarenhas:

Yeah, you too. Thanks for having me.

Rebecca Bamberger:

Yeah, thanks Natasha.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Natasha Mascarenhas from TechCrunch. The goal of our show is to give you an in depth look into the tech industry's most well known and coveted 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.