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Jered Martin:

Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, a 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 discuss their beat and news coverage, what their inbox looks like, the types of pitches they receive and a whole lot more.

Jered Martin:

On today's episode, we're joined by Olivia Solon, the editor of Tech Investigations for NBC News. She has previously worked at news outlets including The Guardian, Bloomberg and Wired. Olivia gives us an in-depth look into her inbox shit show, she shares more about her recent coverage surrounding Facebook and racial bias claims, why she prefers tips over press releases and pitches, and more. Let's hear from Olivia on today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone, welcome to Coffee with a Journalist. We're here with another great journalist for us today, Olivia Solon. Did I get that right, Olivia?

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. That works.

Beck Bamberger:

Excellent. Okay. I'll take it. You're based in San Francisco, you're a journalist for NBC News, particularly, particularly and I want to get into this for a moment, you're the editor of the Tech Investigations. And that's kind of an interesting realm of a title and a role we haven't had on here before. So just to bring everyone up to speed, what does being an editor of Tech Investigations entail?

Olivia Solon:

It's a great job. I run a small team out here in San Francisco. It's me and two reporters. And I also write. And our job is to uncover stories that are kind of outside of the main sort of news grind a little bit. And so taking a bit more time digging into thorny issues and coming up for air with hopefully some pretty good scoops.

Beck Bamberger:

So that leads me to your inbox and what that looks like. So typically when we're talking with people, they get hundreds of pitches or half a hundred or something a day, and most of them are crap. Sometimes they look at them or whatever. Do you get pitches that are ever helpful given your beat and focus?

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. I can't think of many cases where I've written a story... Well, certainly not off the back of a press release recently. That's not to say I haven't done it in the past. But in this current role, most of the stories that I work on are not necessarily the stories that comms professionals want me to be writing.

Beck Bamberger:

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Yeah.

Olivia Solon:

But having said that, there are times when comms people in industries that are doing research or analysis or are familiar with some interesting shenanigans within their industry when they might not themselves be involved in those shenanigans have brought something to my attention or brought a kind of consumer issue to my attention that has warranted further digging.

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Beck Bamberger:

Tell us a little bit more about your inbox on the daily. Are you getting still because doesn't matter seemingly your title, people still will get you all types of crap. Do you get a lot of pitches or is it mostly clean in there? What do you do to organize yourself?

Olivia Solon:

I have to say my inbox has historically been a total shit show, I don't know if I can swear on this show but it has been a nightmare. And since I joined NBC at the end of 2018, I made a really conscious effort to try and get myself taken off a lot of databases or at least to talk to my comms people I know and trust and say, "Look, I'm really not doing these kinds of stories anymore." And so I still get quite a lot of pitches but I think most people and most of the companies I interact with know that I am unlikely to cover a lot of the stuff that they send me. But sometimes it's just a kind of is out of interest. But then I get something out of netFIELD from someone I've never talked to, it won't be a press release but it might be a tip.

Beck Bamberger:

It's a tip. Yeah. I was going to say. And I noticed your Twitter is open for tips. How often do you get tips though? Let's also clarify, credible tips. Because I've heard other people getting, like they get people who say, "I have an opinion on XYZ." And you're like, "Dude, you sit in the middle of Milwaukee doing, I don't know what playing video games all day. You're not a video game industry expert." For instance.

Olivia Solon:

Right. I get a lot of very sketchy tips. So I either get people saying, "I've got a tip." And then they post a press release into my DMs, which is obviously not a tip. But I do get quite a lot of perhaps people who don't come across as the most mentally sound people coming to tell me about some conspiracy theory that they've heard. But sometimes that in of itself is interesting. I'll probably palm it off to some of my colleagues who are covering the dystopia beat.

Beck Bamberger:

Wait a second. Wait a second. Is that someone's actual beat or even like colloquially within you guys where you're like, "Yeah. You're dystopic."

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. They're all the sort of queue and on staff and all the kind of anti-vaxxer stuff stuff.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Olivia Solon:

But it has been useful using, I have Signal and I have my Twitter DMs. It's a very kind of quick and casual way to determine if there's a story or it leads to the beginning of a story.

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Beck Bamberger:

You led me into my next best thing. So that is how a story comes to be. And I bet your answer is going to be different than other folks, which is just along the lines of well... And maybe give me an example if you care to. But what does it take to actually have the story get to the publishing mark? How many, sometimes days does it take, research? Are you thinking about... So some people have told me, "I'm thinking about something in the shower. And then I go like, I'm going to go investigate that." And you get down a rabbit hole. And then it becomes this whole piece six weeks later. So sometimes it starts from there but how does it take or what does it take to get a story out?

Olivia Solon:

Quite a long time in the sorts of stories we're doing most of the time? I mean, there are some times when I'll do a quick turnaround news, like daily news kind of story but that will typically only be if it's serving a bigger investigation we're working on. So for example, I've been working on a few stories on the topic of child sexual exploitation online. And so I've done a few kind of very quick stories about tools and technologies that law enforcement have been using because they kind of feed into a bigger thing that I'm working on in the background.

Olivia Solon:

And so I'm still working on some things in that space. I have published a few investigations in that space as well. But I'll give you an example of a story that I published I think it was last year now but it was about a facial recognition database, data set that IBM was using theoretically to reduce bias in facial recognition, which has historically been a huge issue. It is much more accurate at detecting white faces than black faces.

Olivia Solon:

And so they launched this initiative to create this data set of diverse faces so that they could train better facial recognition algorithms. And it got this... The press release story was like, "Hey, look at this cool initiative from IBM." But something that caught my attention in the press release or at least the way it was covered in the press was that it said they were using people's photos from Flickr to build this data sets.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh. Oh.

Olivia Solon:

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Yeah. And so it turned out that there had just been this, like... In fact, the entire facial recognition industry is built on these somewhat questionably sourced datasets. But it turned out that they had just used the Creative Commons license which allows people to republish photos on their blogs and stuff. They used that to just justify extracting the biometric data from a million people's faces or a million faces from photos on Flickr. And so I just thought, that's interesting. I wonder A, what the photographers think about that, B, what the subjects of those photos think about that. And C, does making facial recognition more accurately identify black faces make it fairer? Is that a good thing given the way that these technologies are used? And I think sometimes we conflate accuracy with fairness in a kind of societal context. And that's certainly not the case. It just makes it a better surveillance tool for black faces if that's the case.

Beck Bamberger:

So in that piece, did Flickr know this? Or were they just completely oblivious?

Olivia Solon:

So yeah, it's like this sort of everyone... In fact, lots of big recognition researchers have known about this for years. The entire machine learning kind of image recognition industry and research is built on just sort of scraping the internet for photos mostly. In this case, Flickr had actually bundled all these photos together, 100 million photos in fact, and just said, "Any researchers, if you want to use these pictures, go for it." And so IBM had only done what many other researchers had done before them but then they were specifically extracting biometric data from the faces in that dataset. And I think in the interim, Flickr had been sold to another company that's now it's called SmugMug.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Olivia Solon:

But anyway, that was just like the start of a story. And it involved quite a lot of digging and it involved finding people whose faces and photos were in that dataset and asking them how they felt about it. Some people were fine about it but most people wanted some kind of option to opt out.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Of course.

Olivia Solon:

And then we got a tool that allow people to know if their photos were in the data set as well. We got a leaked copy of the data set, which we weren't meant to have considered it was supposed to be for academics and they would give it to us. And so we got one and then we built a tool that let people know if their photos were in there.

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. What I love about this is you're the person who's like, "Yeah. I'm going to take that press release. And I'm going to dig in there and find something and find the kernels of a great, huge story that is totally not what you were telling me about in this press release."

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Olivia Solon:

Yeah. Yeah. So that's what I mean about sometimes the comms people aren't super. I mean, I do pride myself on being fair and I want to make sure my stories are accurate and I do have good working relationships with companies, even when some of my reporting might seem fairly antagonistic. But I always give people a lot of time and I'm very open to making changes to stories if they seem to be inaccurate or.

Beck Bamberger:

If inaccurate. Yeah. Fantastic. I love this. This is just so different than the usual responses as some people are like, "Yeah. I delete all my pitches. I never look at anything." Or like, "Yeah. Never send me a press release or anything like..." You're like the opposite of the digger.

Olivia Solon:

I mean, I'm not inviting a flurry of press releases but I do find...

Beck Bamberger:

No. I'm sure you're not.

Olivia Solon:

I do find there are people who I have known for years who understand that I'm not necessarily going to write up the latest product tweak but they might say, "Hang on. We've noticed that there's some bad actors trying to manipulate our platform. It's a new type of attack." Or, "Here's a consumer issue that we're seeing coming up." And particularly for an NBC audience, it's obviously a very mainstream audience. And so I have definitely had to kind of kernels the stories that way.

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Beck Bamberger:

Love it. Just like digging in there. Gosh. Okay. So as you are investigative and of course that hasn't been your whole career for everyone who just heard the intro. That's not the only thing you've ever done here. So it's not too long in this but you've been in tech for a good while here. What do you read? What do you like to read for fun or even for your job?

Olivia Solon:

My goodness. I spend so much time reading kind of the news and Twitter and Slack that when I get to the end of the day, I just want to watch absolute trash TV.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Okay. What are you watching? But give us one, give us one. Just even if it's not that...

Olivia Solon:

My God. I'm almost embarrassed to say. I'm big Bravo TV junkie below deck.

Beck Bamberger:

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Me too.

Olivia Solon:

Right. I mean, it's the best thing on TV. I do have highbrow as well. I do like good gritty dramas.

Beck Bamberger:

I'm sure you have your documentaries in everything.

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. No. But I am reading a few things at the moment but I pick them up, read three pages and then I'm fast asleep. But this balances out the Bravo TV. I'm reading a book called Letters that Change the World, which is just, I mean, it's a compendium of, well, as the title suggests, it's like a bunch of letters from history between military leaders, between authors, between sort of emperors. And it just covers some of the letters that started wars or ended relationships, things like that. And it's just kind of interesting context. And then there's some kind of written context from the author who's Simon Sebag Montefiore. I think he's an historian. But it's really good. I like it. And you can kind of dip in and dip out without feeling like you've forgotten what's happened before because it's just so bite-sized

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Here it is. Written in History: Letters that Changed the World. It's little known. I'm on Audible and only has six ratings. How sad. This sounds phenomenal. Okay. I'm going to buy it.

Olivia Solon:

I think maybe it's like British. I got given it for Christmas when I was back in the UK. So I'm not sure whether they print it here. And then another I've been listening to Glennon Doyle's, Untamed, which is obviously a big hit kind of sort of self-help. I quite like the way it's sort of short pithy chapters. It's not really a continuous narrative that I have to remember. I'm like my Twitter fried brain allows me to not sustain an entire narrative through the course of 300 pages.

Olivia Solon:

And then I'm also listening to, there's a comedian called Adam Buxton who's in the UK who also has a great podcast and he has written a book. And the thing that he's done with his audio book is not just read the text but he's added a bunch of little asides and little sort of audio snippets and music and stuff like that which has really augmented the audio book, which I really like. It sort of elevated it from just a kind of dry, I mean, he's funny, but rereading of the book and made it something unique in audio book form. Because I think his publication got a bit screwed over by the pandemic. And so he went with the audio book first and just kind of augmented it.

Beck Bamberger:

I like that.

Olivia Solon:

But it's called Ramble Book.

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Beck Bamberger:

Ramble book. Okay. I love this because I always get all my books from the show. The last one. You know what? I'm going to start something new, which is passing along what the last journalist told me on this show to you, the next journalist. So the last book I heard, which is currently sitting in my checkout box here is *The Night of the Gun*, David Carr. And it's basically this guy, formerly a reporter wrote for *The New York Times*.

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. Very famous.

Beck Bamberger:

But had two decades worth of addiction. And he's going back in his life and fact checking himself apparently. I haven't read it yet but I'm so fascinated by this. So he's asking friends, family, people he had these discussions with. And was like, "Did I really say that? Did I really come off as this way? Did I really..." So interesting. Right? How to do your memoir in a review of the people in your life previously? Or I guess currently? I'm like, I can't wait to read that.

Olivia Solon:

I haven't read it. I love David Carr's writing. I'm trying to think of how obnoxious my family would think if I did something like that to them. They'd be like, "This is so self-indulgent. Back off bitch." But I think he's brilliant. And I think if you'd been through a life as he has, it would be absolutely fascinating but I haven't read it. And that's a great tip.

Beck Bamberger:

There you go.

Jered Martin:

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Beck Bamberger:

So Olivia, let's play a quick word association game. And you just tell me what the first word you think of is. And we just go down the list.

Olivia Solon:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. So first one, food.

Olivia Solon:

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Ice cream.

Beck Bamberger:

That sounds good. I'm in Joshua Tree right now and it's 107 outside. So I'm going to double click on that one. Okay. Drink.

Olivia Solon:

Gin.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby

Olivia Solon:

Running. But it's a new hobby.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. That's cool. That's fine. Silicon Valley.

Olivia Solon:

Disruption.

Beck Bamberger:

Facebook.

Olivia Solon:

I'm going to be diplomatic here.

Beck Bamberger:

You can back it with a word by the way. Oh.

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. Oh.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. We'll go with that. We'll go with that. Surveillance.

Olivia Solon:

Creepy.

Beck Bamberger:

London.

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Olivia Solon:

Lovely.

Beck Bamberger:

Facial recognition.

Olivia Solon:

Sinister.

Beck Bamberger:

Democracy.

Olivia Solon:

Crumbling.

Beck Bamberger:

Privacy.

Olivia Solon:

Important.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism.

Olivia Solon:

Bloodbath.

Beck Bamberger:

Bloodbath. And then last one inbox.

Olivia Solon:

Like a river, you dip your toes into.

Beck Bamberger:

I love that. That's a good one. That's the most visually beautiful one I've ever heard a response to actually. I like that.

Olivia Solon:

Well, yeah. So you don't have to complete it. You just like check in with it every now and then like Twitter.

Beck Bamberger:

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I like that. It may actually take that approach because so many other people I talked to or whatnot, they just go like, "God, I have to..." They get to zero. I've talked with people who are like, "There's currently 47,000 unread emails in my inbox." I'm like, "My God." It's fascinating.

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. I'm more like that than the former.

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Beck Bamberger:

Gosh. Okay. So we alluded to this just a little bit but what's your take on the future of journalism? You did just say bloodbath. So maybe it's not positive but that's okay.

Olivia Solon:

So it's been extremely depressing. I mean, it's been happening for years, but it has been extremely depressing to see so many colleagues laid off. I mean, not NBC colleagues specifically but as in, in the industry laid off in the last, well, few years and accelerating in recent months because of the pandemic and the ad revenue kind of crisis. But at the same time, over the last few years, in terms of tech journalism, I've seen some of the best tech reporting since I got into tech. And so, I mean, I've been a journalist since 2006, professional journalists since then. And I think some of the best reporting has happened in the last few years.

Olivia Solon:

What does seem to be happening particularly in the US is this consolidation of power media players and then the sort of dying off of local journalism, which I think is a huge shame. But the stuff that's being produced by those that are continuing to make money or at least scraped together money, I think is incredibly powerful. So it's weird because there's simultaneously some of the best work happening but also the outlook is not super encouraging for having a diverse media landscape in the future.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I hear you on that. If you had to go back and when you said, and as mentioned here, I see it on your LinkedIn profile. So back in 2006, right before the crash, you got into your career. Would you tell yourself still, "Yeah. Go down this path. Go do journalism."

Olivia Solon:

I absolutely love my job. I think it's so fulfilling. I don't see it as going to work every day. It's something that I just enjoy doing. I love talking to people. I love digging into and uncovering information that's not easy to uncover. I've been offered... There've been many times when I've been approached to go either to do a comms job or do some kind of internal thing at a tech company. And I'm just not there yet. I mean, ask me in a few years time, maybe there will be some point when I'm just desperate to get out or I get laid off and I'm ready for it. But at this point in time, I can't think of anything else I could do. No. I can think of other things I could do. I can't think of anything else that I would love doing as much as I do.

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Beck Bamberger:

It's so great to hear that and consistent with many people I've spoken to who are like, "There's nothing else I could do. So this has to be it." And I kind of love that because like, what a calling.

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Olivia Solon:

Well, I mean, that makes it sound more noble than it is. Maybe I'm just not qualified to do anything else than just chatting to people on the phone.

Beck Bamberger:

God, but it's good. Well, the last thing I have for us today is this little Mad Libs thing that we like to play with folks. And we'll see what happens with yours and I'll read it back. So I'll give you the words and then you tell me what word you want to offer? And then I'm going to plug it all in into our little thing. And then I read it back and again, we see what happens. Sometimes they're hilarious. Sometimes they're accurate. It's fun. Let's see.

Olivia Solon:

Can I just quickly interject. Maybe because I'm British. I don't think I played Mad Libs when I was younger. Is this just free association?

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Basically. Yes.

Olivia Solon:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

I walk you through the whole thing. So yeah, you don't need to have an ever played before. I actually never did play this one particularly. I missed a lot of core apparent board games. My dad always said it's because, "Well, it didn't snow outside in Southern California. You never had a reason to be inside for seven hours." This is why I never played Monopoly growing up because who has time for a four hour game. Anyway. Okay. So here we go. So what's just any catch phrase of any sort?

Olivia Solon:

Yeah. That's it. I'm reading off my Spindrift can on my desk.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. That's it. Perfect. So what about a scare phrase that's used in journalism like deadline?

Olivia Solon:

Inaccuracies.

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Beck Bamberger:

Inaccuracies.

Olivia Solon:

Or correction.

Beck Bamberger:

What about an empowering journalism buzzword. Or kind of like any buzz word.

Olivia Solon:

Blockchain.

Beck Bamberger:

Perfect. How about just an adjective?

Olivia Solon:

Hungry.

Beck Bamberger:

Then a part of a pitch.

Olivia Solon:

Just gentle reminder.

Beck Bamberger:

Gentle reminder. Yeah. Gentle reminder. Okay. Another adjective.

Olivia Solon:

Terrifying.

Beck Bamberger:

Terrifying. Good one. Another part of a pitch.

Olivia Solon:

Some thinkfluencer.

Beck Bamberger:

Think influencer. People say they have a think influencer to you?

Olivia Solon:

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Think fluency. Like someone who's going to write some old page type thing on LinkedIn about entrepreneurship.

Beck Bamberger:

It's like a thought leadership but now it's called thinkfluencer. My God. That's a new word.

Olivia Solon:

Right. Right. Right. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

God. Okay. Learning something every day. Okay. What about an amount of time?

Olivia Solon:

24 hours.

Beck Bamberger:

24 hours. Okay. We're almost done. An adjective.

Olivia Solon:

Spiky.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Singular noun.

Olivia Solon:

Donut.

Beck Bamberger:

And then a topic.

Olivia Solon:

A topic. Cybersecurity.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Cybersecurity. Yes. And then just a verb ending an ING.

Olivia Solon:

Galloping.

Beck Bamberger:

And then just any verb you want.

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Olivia Solon:

To masticate.

Beck Bamberger:

Domesticate. Okay. Perfect. Okay. Here we go. Here we go. I'm going to read back. To me, tech journalism is yeah. That's it. It consists of inaccuracies and blockchain on the daily. If a pitch has a hungry, gentle reminder, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a terrifying thinkfluencer, you can expect no reply from me. If 24 hours goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not spiky about it. The best stories always have donuts and are usually about cybersecurity. And the best way to reach me is by galloping it over to me but you can also domesticate me.

Olivia Solon:

Masticate. Masticate.

Beck Bamberger:

I thought you said domestic or domesticate. Well, this is a colorful one I have to say.

Olivia Solon:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

I love it.

Olivia Solon:

I mean, I quite enjoyed the bit about the thinkfluencer. I would say that's pretty accurate.

Beck Bamberger:

Thinkfluencer. I'm going to tell it to my team too. Thought leadership has been upgraded to thinkfluencer.

Olivia Solon:

Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Noted. Well, Olivia, thank you for being on today. I've had so much fun. This has been lovely.

Olivia Solon:

Thank you so much.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Olivia Solon from NBC News. If you like our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere

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