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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 more.

Jered Martin:

On today's show, we're joined by Rob Pegoraro, a contributor to Fast Company, Yahoo Tech Finance, Wire Cutter, and The Washington Post. Rob has been a journalist for over 20 years, and now covers computers, gadgets, and consumer tech related news. Rob shares his insights surrounding data privacy, how he thinks about the broader view of a pitch related to a story he's working on, why he hasn't created a TikTok video yet, and more.

Jered Martin:

Let's here from Rob on the show today.

Beck Bamberger:

Hey everyone, welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, the podcast that brings you journalists right to your earphones, headphones, whatever you're listening to in your COVID life, here. We're excited today, to have on Rob. Let me make sure I get the Italian pronunciation correct, Rob, Pegoraro. How was that?

Rob Pegoraro:

There you go, that will work.

Beck Bamberger:

Excellent. You've had quite a long career in journalism, I know Jered already gave us the overview. But, everything from starting in The Washington Post, and being with Discovery Communications. And then, working with computer and communication industry association. And now, a lot of your time is spent contributing to USA Today, Fast Company, Yahoo Tech, and covering all the tech gadgets and widgets, and all the great things that bring us joy, hopefully.

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Beck Bamberger:

Let's start with your inbox. By the way, we note, too, for everybody listening, you've got a great Twitter following, so I'm sure it's busy on there with people DMing you there. But, how does your inbox look, in terms of pitches?

Rob Pegoraro:

It's pretty busy. It's cluttered. Unfortunately, I've been doing this a while so I know that there's going to be some amount of email coming in that is about things that could be interesting, products, services, apps, gadgets, whatever. But, I'm just not going to be able to get around to that. And then there's others, if I think it's interesting I'll click that little button to flag it for follow-up, or star it if it's the Gmail app on my phone.

Rob Pegoraro:

And then, I try to go back to that group of flagged messages, and remember to do something about them.

Beck Bamberger:

Got it. Are you an inbox zero person?

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, clearly not.

Rob Pegoraro:

No. If I can get to unread zero, that's great. But yeah, no, no, no.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, okay. Yeah, I'm an unread zero, but I'm definitely not a zero. There's I don't know, 75,000 emails or something. I never erase anything. Oh, man.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, with the flag. Then, with emails that are pitches, are you reading every single pitch?

Rob Pegoraro:

I do, I at least read it. If its obvious spam, then I'll delete it. If it's off topic, if its from some group that I know is not queued into the same reality that I'm in, there are all sorts of advocacy groups out there. I'll look at the subject line, and then just move onto the next thing.

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Rob Pegoraro:

But yeah, I try to read everything, and at least think about it. Not in the sense of am I going to write about this this week, but could this fit into a story I know I'll do a week or two from now? Does this company have a subject matter expert I might need later on? That's another thing where I make a note of it, and then hopefully I will get back to the company involved.

Beck Bamberger:

What's an advocacy group pitching you for?

Rob Pegoraro:

It's all over the map. There's a variety who are in business to say, "Everything coming out of China is evil and wrong."

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rob Pegoraro:

There's various people on the left. There are some groups that are close enough to advocating we should go back to regulating the airlines, and break up every tech company in existence. There's a certain amount of unrealism on that end as well. It's all weird, because the man in the White House, his grasp of tech policy is not good. Right now, I'm trying to come to grips with how the Administration has decided that TikTok, of all things, is an urgent national security threat.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh my God, yes. What are your thoughts on that? This is dovetailing into a different thing, but go ahead.

Rob Pegoraro:

Yeah. I have to note, I have not actually made a TikTok because I believe I'm too old for that. But, I've looked at the app, I've talked to security researchers about it.

Beck Bamberger:

What do they say?

Rob Pegoraro:

No, people have looked at it. If you just look at the permissions it requests in IOS or Android, it's a really mild mannered app. You can use it, you can go to their website, don't even have to register or set up an account, and just flip away all you want, while away the afternoon.

Rob Pegoraro:

You know, WeChat is much more interesting case.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, I agree.

Rob Pegoraro:

But on the other hand, if you're going to do business in China, you're going to have to have WeChat.

Beck Bamberger:

That's right.

Rob Pegoraro:

The background of this, which is what gets lost all the time, what is the context? The context is there's a huge ad tech stack out there, there's all these other companies that are collecting all this data. So, what if the Chinese are somehow using TikTok, an app that does not even have a location permission, to track a location?

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

Why bother? Because you could just buy that stuff off data brokers, it's already out there.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, it's quite the time we live in, I'll say that.

Rob Pegoraro:

What a time to be alive.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, what a time. Let's go into how you make a story come to light. For instance, you were talking in one of your recent articles about LastPass, and how people are horrible at even creating passwords even though you got no excuse. This stuff is free. What is your excuse not to have a good password, and recycle all the ones that you have? How does a story like that come to be?

Rob Pegoraro:

Password managers, this was one I've been trying to beat this drum for a long time, because I've seen so much bad advice handed out. The discussion always gets warped because you're always going to have somebody saying, "Well, if somebody gets that one password, then they're going to roll over all your accounts." My answer is, "What is your threat model? If a nation state attacker is after you, then maybe a password manager isn't right for you."

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

But then, you shouldn't be getting advice from me, at all.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

You need to level up. For most people, the problem is not that someone is going to try to crack an encrypted records on the password manager server that they can't get to at all, that nobody else can get to, that if you forget your password is gone. The risk is that they won't use the password manager, they'll reuse those passwords. Once one of those accounts gets compromised, the password gets posted somewhere. People can then take those credentials and go on a credential stuffing run, and help themselves to a lot of useful data and whatnot about you.

Beck Bamberger:

And that story, how were you, "Hey, I've got to write something on this, this is bubbling up?" Did it, for example, come from a pitch?

Rob Pegoraro:

No. Most of the security stuff I write about, it's more often ... For instance, USA Today, I do what it is essentially a tech support column. I'm trying to remember when I last wrote about password managers, maybe this means that this should be my next column.

Beck Bamberger:

Maybe.

Rob Pegoraro:

It's a question I get from a reader, or something I see people ask about on Twitter, or something in the news. That's really the result of a pitch, and maybe a case that a pitch will connect me with somebody who can shed some light on this. But, the actual idea for the story is more, one way or another, I come across a problem people are having using technology. And then it becomes, what can I do to help with that?

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Beck Bamberger:

Got it. Then, it's sounding like more the utility of any pitches, for you, is more subject matter expert that you can tap, for further?

Rob Pegoraro:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

I'm always looking for people who can speak intelligently, and concisely, and on a short timetable, about the stuff that I'm trying to understand as well.

Beck Bamberger:

Got it. Hence, your flagging mechanism that you flag some people for stuff, got it.

Beck Bamberger:

What would you constitute as succinctly, for people who are going to do quotes for you?

Rob Pegoraro:

There is a balance, because ... Last year, almost exactly at this time, I was at Black Hat and DEF CON, really emerged in some high level security presentations, and it's fascinating to see how this stuff works.

But then, you need to be able to break it down to people. And again, bear in mind the level of expertise people have, and their own threat model, and not give advice that is not relevant to that context.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. So it needs to be digestible, and quotable. We can't have 17 pages.

Rob Pegoraro:

Shorter sentences, people have a good grasp for the metaphor that will get across how this particular thing works, that's always good.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay. Maybe that's a hint or tip for folks, to think of it how you could even explain something in a digestible metaphor. Especially for something like USA Today, that's a wide audience, a general audience.

Rob Pegoraro:

Very lightly where my editor will say, "Rob, this is kind of in the weeds."

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, it's kind of in the weeds, got it. oh, I love that phrase, that's fun.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Then, is there any other use that you get out of pitches, would you say?

Rob Pegoraro:

Sometimes, if it's time sensitive information, if there's a study coming out and I can get an embargoed look at it and it says something useful.

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Rob Pegoraro:

There was one piece, I wrote it for Fast Company last year. Was it last ... ? I admit, I've lost all grasp of time.

Beck Bamberger:

Me too.

Rob Pegoraro:

I had to run a correction a week ago, when I described a study that came out in May as dating to last year. I think, actually it was a really neat writeup of a security vulnerability in the Hue connected light bulbs that are sold under the Phillips brand. And how the researchers found out about how to exploit this, and how you could leverage this to get onto someone's home network, and how it was promptly fixed. And so, having access to that ahead of time, and a chance to quiz the author, one of the

researchers of the study, to see here's what went wrong, here's how we identified it. And, what are the lessons from that?

Rob Pegoraro:

Number one, being things that patched themselves automatically are great. Because in this case, I could tell the reader, "Assuming you've got your Hue hub set up to update automatically, your work's done, it patched itself last night. You're all good."

Beck Bamberger:

Got it. Okay, so timely things. But, I love that you say you're always looking for the experts, that's good to know.

Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue after this brief message, brought to you by OnePitch.

Jered Martin:

Are you curious to learn more about the unique ways OnePitch helps connect journalists with brands and sources? Head to onepitch.co for more information about how we're helping each side save time and connect more effectively. Sign up for your free account today.

Jered Martin:

Now, back to today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Rob, how about we play a word association game?

Rob Pegoraro:

This could get tricky.

Beck Bamberger:

So you're just going to say the first thing that pops into your mind, okay? Are you ready?

Rob Pegoraro:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

Food?

Rob Pegoraro:

Pizza, I'm from New Jersey.

Beck Bamberger:

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Oh yeah, pizza's a good. God, I'm going to an Italian restaurant tonight, maybe I'm going to get a pizza. That sounds delicious.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink?

Rob Pegoraro:

Bourbon.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Rob Pegoraro:

Cooking.

Beck Bamberger:

Facebook?

Rob Pegoraro:

Argument, I guess.

Beck Bamberger:

Argument.

Beck Bamberger:

Smart phones?

Rob Pegoraro:

Android.

Beck Bamberger:

Google?

Rob Pegoraro:

Search.

Beck Bamberger:

Georgetown?

Rob Pegoraro:

University.

Beck Bamberger:

That's right.

Beck Bamberger:

TikTok?

Rob Pegoraro:

I'm going to say Kesha, because I remember that was a hit song 10 years ago? 12 years ago?

Beck Bamberger:

I know! I have long thought about that. Why would you call the app the name of that song? I always think about that song when I hear TikTok. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger:

Data?

Rob Pegoraro:

Data-esque.

Beck Bamberger:

Space-X?

Rob Pegoraro:

Falcon.

Beck Bamberger:

You recently did a piece on that.

Beck Bamberger:

5G?

Rob Pegoraro:

Hype.

Beck Bamberger:

China?

Rob Pegoraro:

Shanghai.

Beck Bamberger:

Journalism?

Rob Pegoraro:

The truth.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch?

Rob Pegoraro:

PR.

Beck Bamberger:

Inbox?

Rob Pegoraro:

Overflowing.

Beck Bamberger:

Overflowing, like a waterfall. There's a metaphor for you. Got it.

Beck Bamberger:

We always like to ask people. What are you reading right now?

Rob Pegoraro:

For a while, I was doing really good about doing some extended reading. I finally dusted off this copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that I started 10 years ago.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

It's complex. I'm impressed that the censors of 1920 made it all the way into the book, to the really dirty bits at the end, because he's all over the map. Then, I got sidetracked, work picked up. So I picked up a copy of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* at a library's used book sale, thinking I should actually buy it because I will not make my way through it in the course of a library loan.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

It's still sitting on the nightstand, I haven't cracked it open. I'm hoping, it looks like it's going to rain this weekend, so maybe that'll be my chance to finally get launched on that.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, perfect! Okay. Then, what about do you listen to any podcasts? I mean, obviously this one. But, what else? Any podcasts, any Netflix and stuff?

Rob Pegoraro:

Because I haven't had a commute of any sort in 10 years, and there's so many podcasts that are geared towards people with a lot of spare time. I started listening to the Apple Blogger, John Grouper. He had Christina Wallace of Microsoft, whom I've known since she was at Mashable, on as his guest. I thought oh, this is great. I started listening to it, and I thought this is over an hour, I have to cook dinner, I'm never going to get through it. It's now one of 30 tabs open in Safari in my iPad, and I've got another hour to listen to.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. There's one I love, My Favorite Murder. Man, they'll go two hours. It's like Tim Ferris, he'll be doing one interview, two and a half hours!

Rob Pegoraro:

Yeah. I need the 10 minute podcast I can do when I'm folding laundry or something, or waiting for a recipe to finish cooking.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. It takes me a week and a half to get through those, sometimes. Sometimes, if it's juicy and entertaining enough, I'll do it when I'm running. Then it's one run, I can get one podcast in. But, there you go. Okay, that gives us a little insight in there.

Beck Bamberger:

What do you think about, especially since you've been around for a while, the future of journalism?

Rob Pegoraro:

Yeah, it's a real mess. We have this problem where we used to know exactly how to make money, you write something that people want to read, you stick ads next to it, you charge people to run those ads.

Beck Bamberger:

There you go.

Rob Pegoraro:

They only know that you have this many readers, and there's no real targeting, there was no accountability. Now, we have that targeting and that accountability, and it's getting worse and worse for publications all the time. The CPMs keep going down, and so much of the digital ad spend these days is going to Google and Facebook. There's various proposals out there, like should we make them pay? Which I have been around a while, and the notion that you should have to pay to be able to link to a news

story, I don't think the answer to this is creating a new intellectual property right. Making more work for IP lawyers doesn't usually work.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

I like the idea of member supported journalism, interesting sponsorship deals, things that are not necessarily tied to getting a lot of data about your audience and monetizing it.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

The events business looked like a really good strategy for a while, The Atlantic was doing great with that. And then, that went away which is too bad, because they did great events to DC. Whoever at The Atlantic did the catering for The Atlantic Festival, well done. That's not working, right now.

Rob Pegoraro:

Yeah, there's got to be some way to fix this, because I don't think anyone wants to be dumber about the world.

Beck Bamberger:

No. Yes, and I very much think this is part of having a functioning democracy. You've got a lot of media outlets. We would have this podcast if we were sitting in Vietnam, for example.

Beck Bamberger:

What do you think about, I don't usually ask this, but just curious, of generous billionaires, let's say? A la Washington Post, with Bezos.

Rob Pegoraro:

Well, my former shop, it's worked really well. I was not going to guess that because the Graham family's ownership had been the rock on which The Post was built for so many decades. For Don Graham to say, "I can't do this, I'm selling," that was a complete shock. But yes, the Post has done very well by Jeff Bezos. He's put money into the paper, apparently even the CMS is no longer terrible. That's great.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

But, there's only a limited supply of billionaires, and some of them are not just willing to hand over money, they actually want to run things. So the paper in Pittsburgh is in a bad place, because the owners seem to think they know what the political coverage of the paper should look like.

Beck Bamberger:

This is the problem of that, yeah. Now being where you are in your career, would you, way back when you were college age, would you still do it?

Rob Pegoraro:

I would. I would tell myself, as a 25 year old kid ... Social media back then was bulletin board systems. I definitely should have been smarter about taking advantage of social media to promote my work, and to make sure that you have some sort of independent identity. You cannot count on your employer to do your marketing for you, because they may not be around.

Beck Bamberger:

That's right.

Rob Pegoraro:

You need to be prepared to act on your own, and be a little entrepreneurial. But, I love this work. I like learning about how things work, and what's going on in the world, and telling people about it, and being able to have a little fun with the English language in the process. I mean, it beats having a real job.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, there you go. Good. Okay, another notch for yeah, I would do it again. I've asked so many people that question now, at this point, maybe 40 journalists. They all say yes, no one's given me a hell no. It's always yes.

Rob Pegoraro:

"You do need to discern a calling," to use the phrase the Jesuit priests of Georgetown would say about another lifelong occupation.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes.

Rob Pegoraro:

But yeah, you do this because you have to.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, that's great. Okay, to round off our time for today, Rob, now comes a favorite part that we love. We're just going to do a Mad Lib. I'm going to read the phrases we need, and then I'm going to read back the whole thing. Sometimes they're shockingly accurate, so let's see what happens today.

Beck Bamberger:

How about a catch phrase?

Rob Pegoraro:

I'm going to say it is what it is, since that's now been in the news for all the wrong reasons.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, okay. A journalist's scare phrase?

Rob Pegoraro:

The open bar just closed.

Beck Bamberger:

What about a empowering journalism buzzword?

Rob Pegoraro:

We can pay up to \$1 a word.

Beck Bamberger:

An adjective?

Rob Pegoraro:

Snappy.

Beck Bamberger:

A part of a pitch?

Rob Pegoraro:

We can make the CEO available for an interview.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh yeah.

Rob Pegoraro:

Assuming the CEO can still speak like a human being. There's definitely such a thing as too much media training.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah, that's true. What about another adjective?

Rob Pegoraro:

Nuanced.

Beck Bamberger:

Nuanced. Another part of a pitch?

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Rob Pegoraro:

Exclusive.

Beck Bamberger:

Amount of time?

Rob Pegoraro:

Two hours.

Beck Bamberger:

Two hours. Another adjective?

Rob Pegoraro:

Meaty.

Beck Bamberger:

Meaty. A singular noun?

Rob Pegoraro:

Lead.

Beck Bamberger:

A topic?

Rob Pegoraro:

Information security.

Beck Bamberger:

And then, a verb ending in I-N-G?

Rob Pegoraro:

Copy editing.

Beck Bamberger:

And then lastly, just a verb?

Rob Pegoraro:

File.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Oh, okay. Here we go, here we go.

Beck Bamberger:

To me, journalism is it is what it is. It consists of the open bar just closed, and we can pay up to \$1 a word, on the daily. If a pitch has a snappy, I can make the CEO available for an interview, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a nuanced exclusive, you can expect no reply from me. If two hours goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not meaty about it. The best stories always have leads, and are usually about information security. The best way to reach me is by copy editing it to me, but you can also file it over to me.

Beck Bamberger:

That's a pretty good one, Rob.

Rob Pegoraro:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

I like it.

Rob Pegoraro:

All right.

Beck Bamberger:

Maybe some accuracies in there. Two hours goes by, you don't hear from me?

Rob Pegoraro:

I'd like to think two hours is the time I shouldn't need more than that to crank out 700 words, if I have all the stuff in front of me.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Hey, there you go.

Rob Pegoraro:

Really, the time is a function of if I have the whole afternoon in front of me, it's not going to get done in two hours. On the other hand, if my flight is leaving in an hour and I just want to be able to sleep, or my upgrade actually cleared ... Remember flying? Wasn't that great? You got into a pressurized metal tube. Then, I'll totally have it done in an hour.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I know. I know. And no one could call you.

Beck Bamberger:

Well Rob, I've so enjoyed our chat today. Happy Friday, by the way, we're talking on Friday. This has been great. I hope it rains this weekend, so you can get that book in, that would be great.

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Rob Pegoraro:

It would be nice.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes. Yes, yes. Thanks for being on, appreciate it.

Rob Pegoraro:

Thanks.

Jered Martin:

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Jered Martin:

For more information about OnePitch, head to our website at onepitch.co and see the unique ways we're helping journalists and public relations professionals build meaningful relationships. We'll be back next week with an all new guest, and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.