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Jered Martin:

Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who covered topics including technology, lifestyle, and culture, health, science, and consumer products. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like, and how they connect with sources.

Jered Martin:

Today, we're joined by Sissi Cao, a business and tech reporter for Observer. She joined the team in October of 2017, and covers major news and updates surrounding power players, including Tesla, SpaceX, Toyota, Amazon and Uber. She's also worked for Trusted Insight as a finance editor and per Capital News Service as a reporter and web designer. Sissi talks about one of the most interesting cold pitches she received on the show today, the Slack channel, her team uses for PR pitches, the similarities between Silicon Valley and the journalism industry, and more. Let's hear more from Sissi on the episode today.

Beck Bamberger:

Welcome everybody. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, and we're now Season Two, as we've talked about, now 50-plus episodes in, super exciting. Today, we have on Sissi Cao from the Observer, and I'm so glad to welcome you here, Sissi.

Sissi Cao:

Hi, Beck. Thanks for having me.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, and you're drinking coffee, actually.

Sissi Cao:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

It's a rare occurrence on this podcast, interestingly enough. What's your favorite type of coffee by the way? Are you just like black coffee or you put a bunch of stuff in or how does it work for you?

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, I like milky ones. I recently got a Nespresso machine-

Beck Bamberger:

Nice.

Sissi Cao:

... during the lockdown, because I-

Beck Bamberger:

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You got to keep your supply.

Sissi Cao:

There's no more Starbucks.

Beck Bamberger:

Yep. You got to do what you got to do. I wonder how their sales have been?

Sissi Cao:

I bet really good.

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Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I'm going to imagine everyone's like "Shoot, got to make my own coffee." Well, I'm not drinking coffee, but I have my sparkling water here, so we are good. First, I'd like to ask you, Sissi, just about your inbox? How crazy is it in there? How do you keep it under control with pitches?

Sissi Cao:

So my inbox, every morning I wake up to probably more than 100, 150 new emails from everyone. Most of them are, they include PR pitches, some alerts, some just regular newsletters, and just office emails from my coworkers and sources I've been in touch with. And there's also some submissions from people I don't know. They want to write for us.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, you get those?

Sissi Cao:

Yeah. I get those, too. I guess, Observer has a pretty small editorial team. So everybody, even though I'm not the editor who manages these things, but people somehow find my email and send those my way.

Beck Bamberger:

So then you just forward those along, or what do you do to organize those 100-plus emails that come to you?

Sissi Cao:

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I'm going to imagine everyone's like "Shoot, got to make my own coffee." Well, I'm not drinking coffee, but I have my sparkling water here, so we are good. First, I'd like to ask you, Sissi, just about your inbox? How crazy is it in there? How do you keep it under control with pitches?

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Beck Bamberger:

So then you just forward those along, or what do you do to organize those 100-plus emails that come to you?

Sissi Cao:

**I try to carve out maybe like 15 minutes, every two hours throughout the day, just to clear at least the first page of my inbox.** So delete those things I don't have to open, and see if there's anything being flagged or starred, so that I need to look right away. **For those submissions, I tend to take a quick glance at it. And then if it's something, I'll forward it to my coworker. But if not, sometimes I reply to them, sometimes I don't have time to do that, to be very honest.** So yes, that's kind of my system. But sometimes, that's not enough. So I would spend some time Sunday evening to go through my inbox so that I can start fresh on Monday.

Beck Bamberger:

Yep.

Sissi Cao:

Or like maybe Wednesday night, like once or twice a week, I need to spare some time. So delete those things I don't have to open, and see if there's anything being flagged or starred, so that I need to look right away. For those submissions, I tend to take a quick glance at it. And then if it's something, I'll forward it to my coworker. But if not, sometimes I reply to them, sometimes I don't have time to do that, to be very honest. So yes, that's kind of my system. But sometimes, that's not enough. So I would spend some time Sunday evening to go through my inbox so that I can start fresh on Monday.

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Beck Bamberger:

Do you read every pitch?

Sissi Cao:

It depends. **If the subject line is something related to my beat, I would open it and see what's in that.** Sometimes it's just clearly irrelevant, so I just skip those. **We actually, like on our company Slack, we have a channel called worst PR pitches.**

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, no. Can you share? Do you know one of those just off the top of your head, like a bad subject line, even one that you've seen.

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, sure. I think early in the pandemic, one of my coworkers, he writes about entertainment and he got this pitch about how like porn downloads have skyrocketed across the U.S. I mean, it's a real story, but it's not what we usually cover. And the pitch was, was not edited in a very proper way. So that's what kind of made it stand out. But it's just a one example.

Beck Bamberger:

Gosh, yes. Just for those who are familiar, for your section, you have books and theater and arts of all sorts. And that's not in the realm of arts there, so totally makes sense.

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, and there are more crazy stuff.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I'm sure.

Sissi Cao:

I can't think of more on top of my mind, but it's something we can follow up at a later time.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. Well, the fact that you have a Slack channel about it, I think, is enough evidence that there is clearly a supply of those for you guys to share. That's enough. Okay. Well, speaking of stories though, and where they can come up and evolve, keeping in mind, of course, Sissi, that you are writing in the tech vertical, and you do speak about or talk about some of the biggest tech companies there are from the SpaceX's to the Amazons and so forth, do you ever get stories published that originate from a pitch?

Sissi Cao:

Yes.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, okay. Tell us about that.

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Sissi Cao:

Yeah. About a pitch, let's see. You were talking about like less household names.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, maybe some startups, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sissi Cao:

Yeah. About two years ago, I got a pitch from a PR that I had no contact with. It was a first time outreach. She pitched me this very interesting idea of a startup in Michigan that's working on a technology that freezes your STEM cells. So for example, if you're 50 and you're worried that your knee is going to fall apart in 10 years, you can extract some STEM cells from that part and freeze that with the company. They charge you a fee. It's kind of similar to egg freezing service, but the technology is less mature in that specific area of science. So they are pioneering that, and just started offering those services around the country.

Sissi Cao:

I was heading to a tech event. I believe it was TechCrunch Disrupt in September, and the founder would be there. So we just arranged an in-person interview in San Francisco. And we chatted about like, what technology is, how it works, and some ethical questions. Like, if you have like a 50-year-old knee in this fridge for 10 years and you get it back, you get a new knee when you turn 60, how old are you exactly? What if it's not a knee, it's like a more essential organ or something else? So there's a lot of interesting questions.

Beck Bamberger:

I've never thought of that in terms of, especially in a future setting where lots of body parts can be interchanged like a car. How old is it?

Sissi Cao:

Exactly. That's a question that comes up a lot in these biotech companies, especially those with a very clear consumer angle. Yeah, so I ended up doing a feature of that company, and that actually did really well on our site. Yeah, that's just one example.

Beck Bamberger:

That's a great example, though. That not only got a story out of that, but you actually got to meet in person and you got to actually see the founder and all those great things. So there you go.

Sissi Cao:

**Yeah, I try to meet the person I interview as much as I can, because we are in New York. A lot of things are happening in this area. I do my best to make in-person interviews happen. Yeah, but not this year, obviously.**

Beck Bamberger:

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Yes, I'm looking forward to the return of that time. That'll be fun, where you could do an interview in a bar and have a drink. Oh my gosh. It sounds so fantasy level at this point. It'll be back, and I kind of predict that it'll be like a roaring twenties comeback, where people are going to be crazy in fashion, in gluttony. Probably it's going to be a raging economy. Anyway, we digress. We digress. That was a good answer. Let's see. Thanks for ending that. But, oh, that can kind of walk us into this next part, which is word associations, which I do love.

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Jered Martin:

Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) to learn about our new OnePitch Score, and see how easy it is to find the right journalist to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

Beck Bamberger:

Yes, so I'm going to give you a word and then tell us the first thing that comes to mind. Does that sound good?

Sissi Cao:

Okay.

Beck Bamberger:

First one is, food?

Sissi Cao:

Noodle.

Beck Bamberger:

Drink?

Sissi Cao:

Coffee.

Beck Bamberger:

Hobby?

Sissi Cao:

Painting.

Beck Bamberger:

Finance?

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Sissi Cao:

Tesla stock.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, the next thing is Tesla.

Sissi Cao:

Cyber truck.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I saw your article on that, yeah. Airbnb?

Sissi Cao:

Vacation.

Beck Bamberger:

Space travel?

Sissi Cao:

Virgin Galactic.

Beck Bamberger:

Amazon?

Sissi Cao:

Prime.

Beck Bamberger:

Shanghai?

Sissi Cao:

Home.

Beck Bamberger:

2021, which is when this will be debuting, although we are taping it in 2020, late 2020?

Sissi Cao:

Travel.

Beck Bamberger:

Sounds glorious. Journalism?

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Sissi Cao:

Writing at night.

Beck Bamberger:

Pitch?

Sissi Cao:

Gmail.

Beck Bamberger:

Inbox?

Sissi Cao:

Mess.

Beck Bamberger:

Mess. Yes, although it sounds like you have a pretty good wrangle around it.

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, well-

Beck Bamberger:

It sounds like, not to go back into that part, but are you an inbox zero person? Do you get it down to zero?

Sissi Cao:

**No, I try to keep it under 10,000. Well, I've been with the company for a long time. I've accumulated a lot of junk in there.**

Beck Bamberger:

Wow. I get to zero unread. But in terms of the number in there, there's probably like 50-something thousand. Something crazy. It just sits there. It can search all that. No problem. Okay. Sissi, I know you're spending a lot of time reading that inbox, but is there anything else, we love to ask our journalists, that you are reading, enjoying, listening to, anything like that, that you'd recommend? I get all my recommendations from this show, by the way.

Sissi Cao:

Like I mentioned early on, I'm not a big podcast person. But I do listen to episodes that my friends and colleagues recommended to me. I listen to the Longform Podcast. They sometimes have these really in-depth great interviews with reporters talking about longform stories. Lately, I've been reading a book called Trick Mirror. It's by The New Yorker writer, Jia Tolentino. It's a collection of essays she's, she's written on cultural topics, from social media, feminism, celebrities.



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Beck Bamberger:

That's a good one. Good, good, good, good. Oh, I like the cover art of it, too. It's kind of a cool, retro piece.

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, she has a very smart voice on lot of these very complex issues in our society. Yeah, I read her stuff and The New Yorker magazine regularly. I think that the book came out last year and it just, yeah, it has some of her older work and some newer ones, but it's definitely worth checking out.

Beck Bamberger:

It's Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-delusion. It does say, "From The New Yorker's beloved cultural critic comes a bold, unflinching collection of essays about self-deception, examining everything from scammer culture to reality television."

Sissi Cao:

Yeah. It really changes how you, how next time you open your Instagram and see your friends post and how you feel about getting how many likes and shares and everything like that.

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Beck Bamberger:

That's a perfect holiday book to like set yourself up for success, I feel. Sissi, what do you think is the future of journalism?

Sissi Cao:

**Yeah, that's a tricky question. Because that seems to be the question we're trying to answer like collectively in this profession, every day. Yeah. I feel like on a more practical note, I feel like the future of journalism might be increasingly consolidated as what we are seeing with tech consolidation in Silicon Valley, smaller startups getting absorbed by bigger brands, eventually become a big newsroom that has everybody from different parts of the media ecosystem. I think the format is also something I think a lot about. Now there's, podcasts seems to be a very recent thing that, it just started taking off a few years ago, to replace videos and web stories. So I look forward to seeing what's going to happen there, like in either podcast or more of multi-platform storytelling techniques. I don't have an exact answer just yet.**

Beck Bamberger:

Me neither, and it seems like, God, there's just more content, or the same content, but then packaged this way, in this format, in this thing. And you're like, "Oh, my God." I am in a crisis of content, personally.

Sissi Cao:

Exactly. I remember when I was in grad school in, that was 2014, we had this new class, or they even developed a track for, just for creating interactive web stories, these really fancy, like New York Times visualization of how a storm passes and what's the impact on New York and Boston and so on. **It's kind**

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**of a new type of storytelling based on top of data. Some people call it data journalism, some people call it interactive storytelling. A lot of journalists nowadays actually need to take coding classes in college, to, at least understand the basics of it, even though you're not creating those pages yourself. That's also going to be one of, part of the future, when writers get more technical and just get more and more comfortable with computers.** Because having working this industry, I know a lot of writers still have this very old school mindset that, "I'm not good with computers or math. I just write good stories." But maybe one day, this is not enough.

Beck Bamberger:

Yeah. I would say increasingly, it's not, especially if you're going to be covering like enterprise, big companies, stock portfolio news, things like that. I mean, you have that finance background then coupled with the journalism background, which is so, I imagine, pragmatic in so many ways. I haven't heard too many people talk about more what you're alluding to, which is this hybrid of skills, and that what you need to bring more to the table. You need to be better than just, "Oh, I can tell a story or I can make it succinct and understandable and alluring." But also, "I can interpret multiple ways of a story from a data perspective, from a stock analysis, from an IPO synopsis, from all." I mean, all of these other ways that you could do it, from a visual standpoint. Just, wow. It's becoming more demanding on journalism or journalists, I believe.

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, because everybody is a journalist with the tools they have.

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Beck Bamberger:

It's so true. Oh, I like your analysis on that, Sissi. Well, let's play this last part, which is just a fun Mad Lib, which sometimes is shockingly accurate. So let's see. I will give you the word needed, and then I will fill in your answer, and then I will read you back the whole thing. Are you ready?

Sissi Cao:

Okay. Let's do it.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay, first, do you have a catch phrase such as like, "Just do it"? That's Nike's

Sissi Cao:

No worries.

Beck Bamberger:

What is a scare phrase that you hear, being a journalist?

Sissi Cao:

Okay. As soon as possible,

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Beck Bamberger:

Then what about something that's the opposite of that, like super positive or empowering that you would hear?

Sissi Cao:

I'd say when a reader like commented or colleagues said, "I learned a lot."

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, I learned a lot. Yes. That's positive, indeed. Okay. Now these are easier, next ones. What about a adjective, any adjective?

Sissi Cao:

Adjective, calm.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, calm. Great. What about a part of a pitch, any part of a pitch?

Sissi Cao:

Subject line.

Beck Bamberger:

Subject line, okay. What is another adjective?

Sissi Cao:

Chaotic.

Beck Bamberger:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Oh, that's a good one. What about another part of a pitch?

Sissi Cao:

Media assets.

Beck Bamberger:

Media assets. That's a good one. Okay. What is an amount of time?

Sissi Cao:

One hour.

Beck Bamberger:

One hour. Okay, and then another adjective?

Sissi Cao:

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Minimalistic.

Beck Bamberger:

Minimalistic, great. How about a noun?

Sissi Cao:

Dog.

Beck Bamberger:

Dog, great. And then a topic, and then we're almost done?

Sissi Cao:

Topic, healthcare.

Beck Bamberger:

Okay, and then a verb that ends in I-N-G.

Sissi Cao:

Supporting.

Beck Bamberger:

Oh, that's a good one. And then how about just any verb?

Sissi Cao:

Dump.

Beck Bamberger:

Dump. Now I'm going to read back the Mad Lib. Oh my God. Here we go. Here we go. To me, tech journalism is, no worries. It consists of, as soon as possible, and reader comments such as, I learned a lot on the daily. If a pitch is a calm subject line, I will absolutely respond to it. However, if a pitch has a chaotic media assets folder, you can expect no reply from me. If one hour goes by and you don't see an email back from me, you can just assume I am not minimalistic about it. The best stories always have a dog and are usually about healthcare. And the best way to reach me is by supporting me. But you can also dump it to me.

Sissi Cao:

Wow, that's incredibly accurate.

Beck Bamberger:

Aren't these? They sometimes are, these, and I just love it.

Sissi Cao:

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It's like, what's in my subconscious?

Beck Bamberger:

Well, Sissi, thank you for your time today. Thank you for the delight and your poetic ways of thinking about the future of journalism. I really enjoyed having you on today.

Sissi Cao:

That's so great. I really had a lot of fun.

Beck Bamberger:

This was fun.

Sissi Cao:

Yeah, thank you, Beck.

Jered Martin:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring was to Sissi Cao from Observer. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. And if you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guests. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch, head to our website at [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co). We'll see you next week with an all-new guest and even more insights about journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.