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Audio Transcript

Episode 251 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

Publication date: Tuesday September 10, 2024



[A journalist secretly under fire: The hidden investigation of Maya Lau by the LA Sheriff's Department](#)

Maya Lau, a former investigative reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, recently found herself at the center of a shocking revelation. For over three years, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department conducted a secret investigation against her, accusing her of receiving stolen property related to her reporting on a leaked list of problematic deputies. In a conversation on the podcast, Lau personally shares her experiences, reflections, and the chilling implications of law enforcement's actions with E&P Publisher Mike Blinder.



0:00:03.8 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884. Serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:20.0 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off with housekeeping. Those listening on a podcast platform, we want you to follow this program. Those watching on YouTube, there's a subscribe button below, a bell to the right, interact, smash, ring, whatever. Once you do that, you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series dedicated to news publishing we call E&P Reports. Maya Lau, welcome to the program.

0:00:48.4 Maya Lau: Thanks for having me.

0:00:50.3 MB: Oh, it's an honor to have you. We obviously checked into you. We stalked you on LinkedIn. You're an investigative analyst and founder. That's the first thing that shows, of Anza Research. I love your second listing on LinkedIn. You call yourself a mom, a mama, and a mother. And you say being a parent apprenticeship, started in October 2019, four years and 11 months. So I can guess your daughter's age right now. You say by being a mom, I have learned more about psychology, people management, crisis management, human brain development, soft skills. This is amazing that you would list that. You're hosting creator and executive producer of a podcast series called Other People's Pockets. Do you still record those and air those?

0:01:36.9 ML: Yeah, well, we're on hiatus right now, but we are preparing for another season. So we had our first season of 35 episodes last year. And yeah, it's still something I'm working on, Other People's Pockets.

0:01:49.6 MB: And then we're gonna chat about that. I wanna definitely talk about that. The reason I invited you on the program is your time with the Los Angeles Times. We should mention, you definitely have chops as an investigative reporter. But the reason I reached out to you is because we actually posted a story on E&P that the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had actually finally closed a case that started in 2017. Am I right? You were being secretly investigated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Do I have that right?

0:02:27.1 ML: Yeah, according to the reporting that I've read and the conversations that I had with the journalists who wrote that, the LA County Sheriff's Department, which was my beat, that's what I covered day in, day out, opened a criminal investigation into me tied to a leak that I received and subsequently published several articles tied to that. And they wanted to investigate me for receiving stolen property, which as any journalist or First Amendment aficionado knows, journalists generally cannot be prosecuted for receiving leaks. It's one of the most critical things we do, especially if the information is in the public interest. So it's really shocking that they did this. And I only learned about it in June when the reporters contacted me about it.

0:03:22.3 MB: And you've... I don't wanna say left the industry, but you're no longer doing a beat right now. You're doing other things. I'm assuming you're not even paying your SPJ dues now. I mean, you kind of... You've moved to production at the end of it.



0:03:38.6 ML: Yeah, I did a pivot. I left the LA Times in 2021. My daughter, as you mentioned from my LinkedIn profile, was born in 2019. And it was sort of a mix of motherhood, COVID, feeling really not as excited about traditional newspaper journalism as I once did. And so started a long quest of figuring out kind of what was next for myself and realized I had these other passion projects like my podcast, etcetera. So yeah, I left the LA Times in 2021 and really kind of put all that behind me, kind of felt like, okay, that's a really cool thing I did and I'm moving on. And so it was a real shock to get brought back into this world of, oh, guess what? You also have been under investigation, but the investigation is closed.

0:04:29.7 MB: Well, we're gonna unpack all of that. We're gonna ask our audience to stick around, and we'll chat with you about your journey through whatever on the backside of this.

0:04:39.8 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly TownNews. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management, and more. Join the over 2,000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with BLOX Digital, serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust BLOX Digital to empower you, to connect you at scale with the community you need to reach. BLOX Digital, formerly TownNews, now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:05:45.3 MB: All right, Maya, the Sheriff's Department deemed you a criminal suspect for receiving what they called stolen property. Do I have that right? And that stolen property was information that was leaked to you about sheriffs within the department. Is that correct?

0:06:03.5 ML: Yeah, it was tied to what's called the Brady List, which is a list of deputies that were found to have committed various types of misconduct. And what the Brady List is, is almost every police agency has or should have this list across the US because the issue is that when police officers or deputies go to testify in cases in which they were involved, so they arrest somebody, and then that person who was arrested now is on trial, and the deputy or officer is testifying, the defense counsel has the right to know, is there any information about this deputy or officer's past that we should know about, such as they've been found to have lied in the past? Well, that's a Brady issue because it shines a light potentially on this person's character.

0:06:55.3 ML: And so the problem is in California, these lists were so secret that not even prosecutors could access them, and so thus not even defense counsel could access them. And I received information about who was on the Sheriff's Department Brady List and why they were on it. And many of these deputies were still on the force. And so this at the time was really key information because this had never been obtainable before. And what we ended up doing was publishing. We didn't just take the list and slap it on the internet. We spent months researching, why did these people get put on the list? Does it matter? Do we have backup evidence to show and corroborate what is on the list? 'cause the list could contain errors. It also had very shorthand information about why somebody was on it, but not details. And so we went and found details and then ended up putting out a story in late 2017 that said, these deputies are on the list for these reasons. There was sexual assault, there was lying, there was things like that. And ultimately did a

series of stories over the course of two or so years that helped to change the law in California. We ended up showing how this secrecy violates the rights of defendants.

0:08:19.8 MB: But I don't see any stealing there. I'm sorry. I mean, this obviously, you stole nothing. And you did your own investigative reporting after getting the names.

0:08:29.9 ML: Correct. And it's sort of investigative reporting 101 that you receive information from sources.

0:08:38.4 MB: I mean, exactly. So given the intensity of this investigation, and I have to ask this, 'cause there are people that are in your position that take on the law enforcement, did you ever feel pressure or felt threatened during this process at all? Or were you cool the whole time?

0:08:57.5 ML: I didn't know that it was happening until just two months ago after the investigation was closed. And when the reporters called me and said, did you know that this happened?

0:09:05.5 MB: So even for the entire time that you were being investigated, nobody tipped you off, no one who they may have called or checked or anything, just all what's happening in the background. And you were just tooling along, leaving the industry and this was all going on.

0:09:18.5 ML: Yeah. I think I had a reaction, a little bit of shocked, but not surprised. It was always something I thought could happen. I was always checking over my shoulder a bit in life, because I covered the sheriff's department. But I never got any concrete information that I was being investigated. And truthfully, I knew I never did anything wrong. So I just felt like I'm doing my job just the same way any other investigative reporter is doing their job. And so I really didn't know about it and was shocked to hear about it.

0:10:00.4 MB: Well, this is getting air now. I mean, it's not a dead issue, because now everybody's looking back over these years and getting concerned. The First Amendment Coalition has raised concerns. How do you think this case has influenced the broader or will influence the entire journalistic community? Do you think this is gonna take some air? And are you gonna be standing on stages, do you think... And talking about this? Are you getting calls?

0:10:26.6 ML: Well, I hope that... Yes, I'm definitely getting calls. I'm having conversations. This is still a live issue, as it should be. And I think that this is a conversation not only in the journalism community, but should be in the law enforcement community too. That guess what? You can't do this. This is an intimidation tactic against journalists. And I would hope that there is some learning somewhere going on in the sheriff's department and in any police agencies across the US that would even think of doing this, that this is not supposed to happen. I hope that it's not just seen as moving on.

0:11:13.6 MB: No, no.

0:11:14.0 ML: So yeah, it's definitely a live issue.

0:11:17.4 MB: So you're okay with the spotlight now, because deep in your soul, and I'm not trying



to be... I'm not trying to paint you with a broad brush. Deep in your soul, you are an investigative journalist. You had that passion while you were doing it.

0:11:29.0 ML: Yes.

0:11:30.1 MB: You know shining that spotlight in the corners and being that final check on power in a Madisonian democracy. So the spotlight's on now. Do you have any interest in coming back?

0:11:44.8 ML: Oh, to investigative journalism?

0:11:49.2 MB: I got hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of editors listening to this program. I mean, do you have an interest in getting back in the game?

0:11:56.8 ML: I think about it sometimes. I think about maybe later in my career. I think part of what made me feel comfortable with leaving newspapers was I just finally realized I can always go back. I mean, hopefully by the time I go back, newspapers will still exist. But yeah, I find that there are jobs. But yeah, I do think about it. It is really fun to kind of dive back into this world every now and then.

0:12:26.7 MB: Well I got to ask, we had Matt Pearce on this program. I don't know if you remember Matt, the head of the Union.

0:12:31.0 ML: Yeah, yeah. He's a friend of mine. And I just saw him. Yeah.

0:12:35.8 MB: We dug deep into the conundrum or whatever you wanna call it, the problems at the LA Times. Was some of the reason why you left, not just because you wanted to get away from the deadlines and be a good mom, because you were kind of, according to what I'm reporting, and again, you can challenge me, this kind of a dysfunctional operation at the time, you just getting frustrated with the industry in general?

0:12:57.2 ML: Yeah, definitely. So my podcast is about personal finance. And in it, I ask people how much money they make and how they do it and how they feel about it and what their money ups and downs have been in life. And money had been something I was just really interested in on a personal level. And looking at my own personal finances in newspapers, I just felt like this is ridiculous. Not to say I was scraping by, but I didn't feel like I could really get ahead. I didn't feel like I could buy a home in LA, I felt like just really curious about the world beyond. I would see friends of mine win Pulitzers and not get a raise after that.

0:13:46.8 ML: And it felt like, wow, so you can win a Pulitzer and be at the top of your field, but it doesn't necessarily translate to financial reward. It doesn't translate to now you've made it and now you will be fine. And not to say I ever expected riches, but it just felt like, okay, so what am I working toward? And I felt my inspiration kind of get sapped a bit. And then I felt like I just wasn't as inspired by even switching papers 'cause I'd worked at different papers and I felt like I'd read a job posting for whoever, ProPublica, The New York Times. And it was like, I know what it's gonna be like.

0:14:32.5 ML: I'm sure it'll be great, but I kind of started to find my tribe, so to speak, in former journalists and in people who had a story like me of getting frustrated and just saying, what if I did something else? And a lot of them were really happy and were doing things that they believed in and felt inspired by. So yeah, it was basically that. It was basically feeling like I'm someone who always wants something new and to feel like I'm on the edge of something. And yeah, I think I did get tired of the state of the industry and the sort of doomsday vibe of it all.

0:15:14.9 MB: I get it. I mean, I'm a publisher. I'm a publisher of a 140-year-old brand, desperately trying to make sure that local journalism survives and still trying to get a profit out of this thing. I feel for you, but we're a little bit more Pollyanna here, or at least as the publisher, I'm a little bit more Pollyanna 'cause I believe that this society needs a free, independent, unfettered press or we don't survive. And luckily, we're seeing philanthropic dollars start to flow our way. Finally, big tech looks like they're gonna have to pony up, especially in the state you're in right now. There may be ways that we can finally make sure that the journalists that we so desperately need get compensated for the content that everyone needs today to survive.

0:16:04.5 MB: But so that's where I'm gonna ask you this question now, as we get near the end of our journey, if you were to meet a young pup who just had, you know, watched Newsroom, you know, or an Aaron Sorkin something and realized that they had that passion to go out there and be that voice as the Scripps logo shows that spotlight into the dark corners, what advice would you give them after, you know, being in the industry and living it and winning awards and accolades and being investigated and making a difference? What advice would you give them?

0:16:38.0 ML: Well, I do give this advice 'cause people do contact me all the time wanting to know my take. I say, first of all, go for it. If you feel like this is what you wanna do, you should absolutely try to do it. It's the most thrilling, exhilarating job there is or one of them. It's something you'll never forget. And you'll get skills that no matter what, you can transfer to anything. I truly believe that. I would also say, you know, be aware of how you're developing skills alongside that, that are gonna help you in journalism, that are gonna help you afterward. That's entrepreneurial skills. That's building your brand. That's thinking about where media is going and thinking also about not just hitching your wagon to a brand, say CNN or The New York Times or whatever. I mean, those happen to be thriving brands. But even then, you don't really control what happens with them. And so to think about your career in terms of you are building your own brand, your own network. And yes, you are going to hopefully work for some great companies.

0:17:57.8 MB: I'm gonna leave it at that. But as the closing, I'm gonna read you to you from ChatGPT. And I want you to... When I'm done, this is what ChatGPT says about you. You give it an A or an F. You ready?

0:18:09.0 ML: Okay.

0:18:11.1 MB: 'cause every other story we do now is on AI. I'm sure you know that. So here we go. Maya Lau is an American journalist known for her investigative reporting. She has worked for prominent publications, New York Times, LA Times, ProPublica. Her work often focuses on issues related to criminal justice, law enforcement and social justice. At the LA Times, she was particularly known for coverage of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which reported



on misconduct and corruption. And her reporting has earned her recognition and awards and its impact in depth. And here's what it says for her or him or they, them, whatever. Maya's journalism is characterized by a commitment to uncovering truths and holding powerful institutions accountable. There you go. You're gonna live forever 'cause that's what ChatGPT says about you.

0:18:57.7 ML: Interesting. Okay. So I've never worked at ProPublica, so I'm not sure where it got that. I've never even published anything for ProPublica. That's hilarious.

0:19:07.7 MB: Got it wrong there. Good. That's why it's never gonna take over journalism. You know what I mean?

0:19:13.4 ML: Yeah. Well, I don't know. It's learning everyday.

0:19:17.1 MB: Please stay in touch with us. Let us know how this journey goes and what impact this makes on being able to show truth to power. 'cause I have a feeling that a whole new story is starting right now. And it all dates back to stuff that happened five years ago, thanks to your great reporting. We appreciate your time.

0:19:34.6 ML: Thank you so much