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with Mike Blinder
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Examining self-presentation in journalism: Elia Powers on authenticity and industry norms

For decades, journalists have been judged not just by their reporting but by how they look and sound, often conforming to rigid, unspoken industry standards. But as news delivery shifts to digital platforms, podcasting, and AI-driven content, those norms are being challenged like never before. In *Performing the News*, Elia Powers reveals how journalists—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—navigate the pressures of self-presentation and fight for authenticity in an evolving media landscape. Are the days of the "perfect broadcast voice" and polished TV anchor look finally over?

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

Mike Blinder:
And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher of *E&P Magazine*. As always, we kick off urging those who listen on podcast platforms to follow, and those who choose to watch on our YouTube channel to subscribe. The button is below, the bell to the right. Please engage, because when you follow or subscribe, you get updates every time we upload a new episode of *E&P Reports*. Dr. Elia Powers, welcome to the program.

Elia Powers:
Thanks, Mike. Great to be here.

Mike Blinder:
I'm nervous because you wrote a book called *Performing the News: Identity, Authority, and the Myth of Neutrality*, exploring how journalists, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, grapple with industry norms and pressures related to self-presentation. In other words, what I'm doing right now—sitting in front of a microphone, talking into a camera.

Elia Powers:
Right, that's what we're both doing right now.

Mike Blinder:
Wow. And this book is really interesting. But first, let me introduce you to the audience. We have a tradition here at *E&P*. We report a lot on AI, so we no longer go to your About page or LinkedIn profile. We go straight to the horse's mouth—we ask ChatGPT about our guests. ChatGPT tells us who you are, and then you rate it. Are you ready?

Elia Powers:
I'm ready and prepared. I've heard about this, and I'm curious—what is it going to come up with for me?

Mike Blinder:
Here's what it came up with:

"Dr. Elia Powers is an associate professor of mass communication at Towson University, where he specializes in journalism, media literacy, and audience engagement. His research focuses on how people consume the news, the evolving relationship between journalism and the public, and media ethics. In addition to his academic work, Dr. Powers has contributed to several publications, providing insights on media trends, journalism education, and the intersection of technology and news consumption."

Do I have that right?

Elia Powers:
I mean, I like it. Yeah, I'll take it.

Mike Blinder:
Okay, that's pretty darn good. The book is out. It's fascinating. I'm going to urge my audience to stick around because we'll get into it right after this.

Announcer:
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Mike Blinder:
Okay, I'm not going to call you Dr. Powers, I'm going to call you Elia.

Elia Powers:
Oh yeah, please. Yeah, please do.

Mike Blinder:
Elia, what inspired you to write *Performing the News*, and why is this topic relevant, especially in today's news ecosystem?

Elia Powers:
|Yeah, so just a little personal background. When I was really young, I wanted to go into broadcasting. Like a lot of young people, I wanted to be a TV sports announcer. I harbored that interest for a while, but I had a stutter growing up, and it got worse as I entered middle school—the worst possible years to have a stutter. No one ever told me I couldn't go into broadcast journalism, but I just had this sense from watching TV and listening to radio that I didn't have the traditional broadcast voice.

So I ended up going into print journalism, which I enjoyed and have no regrets about. But in the back of my mind, I always wondered what would have happened if I had stuck with my original dream. Fast forward to now—I teach a podcasting class, and my stutter has subsided over the years. I decided to start researching journalists' experiences, beginning with those who, like me, had a stutter and entered TV and radio. Surprisingly, quite a few journalists with speech impediments are in broadcasting—some cover it up well, others don't.

That led me to expand my research beyond speech to broader appearance norms. The book looks at how journalists in podcasting, radio, and TV learn about expectations for their voice and how they should present themselves on air. I also explore the experiences of journalists from historically marginalized backgrounds, who often receive even more scrutiny. The book is based on dozens of interviews with journalists, agents, speech coaches, and image consultants—everyone involved in shaping journalists' self-presentation.

Mike Blinder:
You interviewed a wide range of people—journalists, media coaches, industry leaders. I know you want to sell the book, but let's dig into the pages. What were the most striking or surprising insights you gained?

Elia Powers:
One of the biggest surprises was that journalists didn't necessarily need someone to explicitly tell them how to present themselves. Many just absorbed expectations through observation—watching how people dressed at internships, hearing professors make offhand comments about professionalism, and internalizing industry norms.

For journalists from marginalized backgrounds, this was even more pronounced. Many of them rarely saw people who looked like them on TV, especially in the '80s, '90s, and early 2000s. The assumption was that you had to adopt a neutral, Midwestern accent or a standard broadcast voice to be taken seriously. They just picked up on this through osmosis.

Mike Blinder:|
That's a powerful point—just drinking it in, absorbing those norms. So why did you focus specifically on historically marginalized groups instead of looking at all journalists?

Elia Powers:
All journalists learn industry norms—enunciating clearly, looking professional, avoiding distractions like flashy jewelry. But marginalized journalists, particularly journalists of color and women, often face extra scrutiny.

For example, accents. Journalists with non-standard dialects, particularly journalists of color, are often pressured to sound more "neutral." Women, especially in radio, get criticized for vocal fry or upspeak more than their male colleagues. Public radio insiders have openly said that male journalists receive far fewer complaints about their voices than women. These factors disproportionately affect certain groups, which is why I wanted to highlight their experiences.

Mike Blinder:
And some people might bristle at hearing that. How dare we have these preconceived notions based on gender or background? So, in your research, did you find any journalists actively pushing back against these restrictive industry norms? Were there cases where they said, "No, I'm going to be me," or did most just fall in line?

Elia Powers:

Absolutely, there's pushback. Things have improved in certain areas. Take hair, for example. Not something I had ever thought much about before working on this book, but it's a huge issue for female TV journalists.

For years, there was this unspoken expectation of the "anchor bob"—that mid-length, straight hair look you automatically associate with a female news anchor. Journalists spent hours straightening their hair to fit that mold. But recently, more Black female journalists have chosen to wear their natural hair on-air, pushing back against that expectation.

It might seem like a small thing, but it's actually huge. Straightening hair takes time, costs money, and has even been linked to health risks. So breaking away from those norms allows journalists to present themselves authentically without jumping through unnecessary hoops.

Similarly, young journalists today say they don't feel as much pressure to adopt a certain voice. Twenty years ago, they might have been told to eliminate regional accents or adjust their tone, but today, there's more acceptance of varied voices in media.

Mike Blinder:

Let me frame this question properly because I think you touched on something critical. You originally wanted to be a sports broadcaster, and a lot of what you're talking about revolves around journalists entering the industry through broadcasting. But *E&P* has traditionally served the newspaper industry, now heavily digitized.

When I consult with media companies, the first thing I tell them is to do more podcasts, capture interviews on Zoom, and create video content. The future of news delivery isn't just the written word—it's video, short-form content, and multimedia.

Now, imagine a journalist entering this world thinking they'd never have to be on camera, and suddenly, they have to master presentation. It reminds me of airline employees—those who were bilingual always had a better shot at career advancement. Would you say the same applies to journalists today? That if they don't master video and self-presentation, they could get left behind?

Elia Powers:

Absolutely. And that's part of why this book feels timely.

Back in the day, I chose print journalism specifically so I *wouldn't* have to worry about my voice or how I looked on camera. Sure, I might ask a question at a press conference or occasionally appear on TV, but I never expected to be front and center.

That's no longer the case. Even veteran print journalists now find themselves in front of microphones and cameras. I recently spoke with an editor who said, "We have staff who need to be trained *now* to sound their best on podcasts." That wasn't part of the job description years ago, but it is now.

And podcasting is a fascinating case study because it doesn't have decades of entrenched norms. There isn't one "right" way to sound. Instead, authenticity matters most. Audiences want to hear people who sound like them, not just the polished public radio voice.

Mike Blinder:
The norms have changed dramatically—even just since COVID.

Pre-pandemic, if MSNBC wanted me to appear on *Morning Joe*, they would've flown me to New York, put me in a hotel, sent a limo, prepped me in a green room, and made sure I looked my best before shoving me in front of the camera.

Now? I can appear from my kitchen with a cat behind me, and no one bats an eye.

But let me ask you this: At *E&P*, there are two topics we have to cover carefully because they divide our audience—unions and AI. Half our audience supports unions; the other half are publishers who oppose them. Same with AI. Some see it as a newsroom efficiency tool, while others see it as a threat to journalism.

AI can now generate a news anchor with all the traits you've studied—voice, appearance, everything. What's your take on that?

Elia Powers:
Funny you mention that—I'm currently studying how college students react to AI news anchors.

In one experiment, they got to customize their own AI anchor. They could tweak the voice, the look, everything. But what surprised me is that, even though they could create a newscaster exactly to their preferences, they still found AI-generated voices robotic and off-putting.

There's something about real human presence that resonates more. AI news presenters might work for quick updates, but I don't see them replacing human journalists entirely. People form connections with podcast hosts and broadcast anchors. There's a parasocial relationship there, and AI doesn't quite replicate it.

So, I wouldn't worry too much about AI replacing human presenters—at least not yet.

Mike Blinder:

I have to confess—I'm not actually here. I'm on a beach in Aruba, and this is all AI-generated.

Elia Powers:
(laughs)

Mike Blinder:
No, but seriously, I once interviewed ChatGPT on my show, and she *did* cop an attitude. You should check it out.

We're running out of time—I try to keep these around 20 minutes, but I could talk to you for hours. So let me ask my big 50,000-foot question: What do you hope news organizations take away from your book?

Elia Powers:
I wrote this book for both academics and industry professionals. I want people who train and mentor journalists to recognize how their words—both what they say and what they *don't* say—affect young journalists' perceptions of themselves.

For instance, I try to avoid saying someone has a "good" or "bad" broadcast voice. Instead, we should ask: "How do you want to present yourself? What are your goals? What are your concerns?" It should be a conversation, not a rigid directive.

Of course, I understand newsroom leaders need to think about audience perception. But the industry is evolving, and it's time to reconsider outdated norms.

Mike Blinder:
Where can people buy *Performing the News*, and how can they follow your work?

Elia Powers:
It's available through Rutgers University Press, and I always encourage people to order directly from the publisher or local bookstores. Of course, it's also on major retailers. I also occasionally do my own podcasting, so people can follow me there.

Mike Blinder:
Dr. Elia Powers, associate professor at Towson University and author of *Performing the News*. Elia, it's been a pleasure. I'd love for you to contribute to *E&P* as we continue exploring this important aspect of journalism.

Elia Powers:
Thanks, Mike. Great talking to you.