

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #273

The Masked Author: From Ben Franklin to AI Stylometry

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn dive deep into the world of pseudonymous writing, tracing its evolution from the Brontë sisters and Benjamin Franklin to the high-stakes world of modern whistleblowers. They break down the complex legal and financial mechanics of publishing anonymously, explaining why a simple pen name isn't enough to hide from a determined investigator or a tax audit. The conversation takes a futuristic turn as they explore the cutting edge of 2026 technology, specifically "adversarial stylometry." Discover how modern authors are using Large Language Models to mask their unique linguistic fingerprints, allowing for a level of privacy that was once thought impossible. Whether you're a budding novelist or an activist with a secret to tell, this episode reveals the tools and risks of the digital masquerade.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

I'd like to discuss pseudonymous publishing—writing under a pen name or fictitious identity. This topic is especially relevant to privacy and whistleblowing, and I believe AI is making it significantly easier for authors. I'm interested in how long this tradition dates back, how it works mechanically within the publishing industry—particularly regarding royalties and legal risks like defamation or retribution—and how common it is today.

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

You know, it is funny how often we think we know someone through their words, only to find out the person behind the curtain is someone else entirely. I was just thinking about that this morning while looking at the bookshelf in the living room.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, present and accounted for. And you are probably looking at that copy of Cuckoo's Calling, right? The Robert Galbraith book that turned out to be J K Rowling.

Corn

Exactly. It is a classic move. But our housemate Daniel actually sent us a prompt that goes way deeper than just a famous author trying a new genre. He was telling us about this experiment he did, publishing a book on Amazon under a completely fabricated, over the top persona just to mess with his family.

Herman

I remember that. It was a guide to moving to Israel, written by this incredibly brash character he invented. It is a great example because it shows how low the friction has become. You do not need a three-book deal and a secret meeting with an editor anymore. You just need a laptop and a Kindle Direct Publishing account.

Corn

Daniel was asking about the history of this, the mechanics of how you actually get paid without revealing who you are, and the legal side of things like whistleblowing or defamation. And he brought up a really interesting point about how A I is changing the game for pseudonymous authors.

Herman

It is a massive topic. We are talking about everything from the Brontë sisters to the Federalist Papers to modern day whistleblowers. And the technology side of it, especially style-switching with A I, is something we have to dig into. We are currently in January of twenty twenty six, and the tools available to a writer today would have looked like science fiction to the authors of the nineteenth century.

Corn

Let us start with the history, because this is not a new trend. Why have people been hiding their identities for centuries? It is not always just for a joke like Daniel's.

Herman

Oh, definitely not. Historically, the reasons fall into a few buckets. There is the social or cultural bucket, the political bucket, and the artistic bucket. In the nineteenth century, you had Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Most people now know them as Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë. They used male-sounding pseudonyms because, at the time, women writers were often dismissed or treated with a sort of patronizing prejudice. They wanted their work to be judged on its merits, not through the lens of their gender.

Corn

And it goes even further back than the Brontës. I was reading about Benjamin Franklin the other day. He was a master of the fake persona.

Herman

He really was. When he was only sixteen years old, he wanted to write for his brother's newspaper, the New England Courant, but he knew his brother would never publish a teenager's work. So he invented Silence Dogood, a middle-aged widow who wrote letters to the editor full of sharp social commentary and advice. He would slip the letters under the door of the print shop at night. Silence Dogood became a local sensation. People were writing in to propose marriage to her! Franklin didn't reveal the truth until after fourteen letters had been published, and his brother was actually quite annoyed about it.

Corn

It is interesting that the goal was often to bypass a gatekeeper. Whether it was a brother, a sexist publishing industry, or a government. Which brings us to the political side. The foundation of the United States was basically built on pseudonyms.

Herman

Right. The Federalist Papers were all published under the name Publius. That was Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. On the other side, the Anti-Federalist Papers used names like Brutus or Centinel. It allowed them to debate the very structure of a new government without the baggage of their personal reputations or the risk of immediate political retribution. It focused the reader on the argument itself. In the eighteenth century, using a pseudonym was often a matter of life and death. If you criticized the crown or the church under your real name, you could end up in the pillory or worse.

Corn

So it was a shield. But let us talk about the mechanics Daniel was curious about. If I want to publish a book today as, say, Barnaby McSniff, how does that actually work with a publisher? They have to know who I am, right?

Herman

Yes, in a traditional publishing setup, the publisher absolutely knows. You sign a contract with your real name. There is usually a clause that says the publisher will keep your true identity confidential. But the business side is where it gets tricky. For the publisher to send you a check or a wire transfer, they need your tax information and your bank details. In the United States, that means a W nine form with your Social Security number.

Corn

So if I am a whistleblower writing an exposé on a major corporation, and I use a pseudonym, the paper trail still exists within the publishing house. That feels like a vulnerability.

Herman

It is a huge vulnerability. If a court issues a subpoena, a publisher might be legally compelled to reveal the author's identity. This is why some high-stakes authors use a layer of legal protection. Instead of signing as themselves, they might form a Limited Liability Company or an L L C. The contract is between the publisher and the L L C.

Corn

That sounds like what we talked about in episode two hundred sixty-five when we were looking at the legal lasagna of corporate structures. You are essentially creating a legal shield.

Herman

Exactly. The royalties go to the L L C's bank account. Now, you still have to be the beneficial owner of that L L C for tax purposes, but it adds a layer of obfuscation. If someone searches public records, they see the name of the company, not the name of the whistleblower. States like Wyoming or Delaware are popular for this because they allow for anonymous L L Cs where the members' names are not part of the public record. But even then, as we know, determined investigators or government agencies can often pierce that corporate veil if there is a suspicion of criminal activity.

Corn

What about the self-publishing route? Daniel mentioned Kindle Direct Publishing, or K D P. He said Amazon knows who he is, but the public sees the pen name. Is that safer or riskier?

Herman

In some ways, it is more private because fewer human beings are involved. There is no editor, no marketing team, no publicist who might accidentally slip up at a cocktail party. It is just you and the database. But you are still giving Amazon your tax I D. If you are worried about a government agency, Amazon is a very centralized point of failure. And let's not forget the digital footprint. Every time you log into your K D P account, you are leaving an I P address. If you are not using a V P N and a dedicated, air-gapped machine, you are leaving breadcrumbs.

Corn

Let us get into the legal risks Daniel mentioned, specifically defamation and retribution. If I write a book under a pen name and I say something libelous about a public figure, does the pseudonym protect me from a lawsuit?

Herman

Not in the slightest. A pseudonym is not a legal shield against liability. If you defame someone, they can sue John Doe. Then, through the discovery process, they can subpoena the platform, whether it is Amazon or a traditional publisher, to identify who John Doe actually is. Once your identity is revealed, you are personally on the hook for those damages. In fact, being anonymous can sometimes make you a bigger target because it suggests you have something to hide.

Corn

So the pseudonym is really just a marketing or privacy tool, not a get-out-of-jail-free card for legal trouble.

Herman

Right. It is more about managing your public persona. But for whistleblowers, the risk is often not a lawsuit, but professional or physical retribution. If you are writing about a corrupt regime or a dangerous organization, you are trying to stay anonymous long enough for the information to get out and for you to get to safety. We saw this with the Syrian military photographer known as Caesar, who smuggled out thousands of photos of torture victims. His pseudonym was a matter of survival for him and his family.

Corn

This brings us to the AI piece. This is where I think things get really fascinating and a bit scary. Daniel mentioned that AI makes it easier for authors. I can see the obvious ways, like generating a fake back-story or a headshot using something like Midjourney. But there is a deeper level here, isn't there?

Herman

You are hitting on something we touched on in episode two hundred sixty-four when we talked about transformer architectures. Every writer has what we call a linguistic fingerprint. It is the way you use certain adjectives, your average sentence length, your preference for active versus passive voice. This is the field of stylometry.

Corn

Stylometry. The science of identifying authors based on their writing style. I remember you mentioning how it was used to unmask J K Rowling.

Herman

Exactly. In twenty thirteen, a computer scientist named Patrick Juola used stylometric analysis to compare the text of *The Cuckoo's Calling* to Rowling's known work. He looked at word frequencies and character n-grams and found a statistical match that was too close to be a coincidence. Even when she was trying to write in a different genre, her subconscious habits gave her away. And it happened again with Joe Klein, the author of *Primary Colors*. A professor at Vassar College used a computer program to compare the book to the work of several political journalists and pegged Klein as the author with high confidence.

Corn

So if I am a whistleblower today, my biggest enemy isn't just the paper trail, it is my own writing style. If I have written thousands of emails or reports in my real job, a sophisticated actor could compare those to my anonymous book and find me.

Herman

Precisely. But here is where A I changes the game in twenty twenty six. We now have what is called adversarial stylometry. You can use a Large Language Model to essentially perform a style transplant. You can feed your draft into an A I and say, rewrite this in the style of a hard-boiled noir novelist, or make the prose more academic and dry. You are intentionally breaking your own linguistic fingerprint.

Corn

So you are using the A I as a sort of stylistic mask. You are not just changing the name on the cover; you are changing the D N A of the sentences.

Herman

It is incredibly effective. By shifting the cadence, the vocabulary, and even the grammatical errors, you can make the text almost impossible to link back to your original writing using traditional stylometry. There are even specialized tools now, like J Stylo A I, that are designed specifically to help authors obfuscate their style. It allows for a level of pseudonymous security that simply did not exist five or ten years ago.

Corn

That is a massive shift. It means that the barrier to entry for a truly anonymous publication is much lower. You do not need to be a master of mimicry yourself; you just need to know how to prompt an A I.

Herman

And it goes beyond just the text. Think about the research phase. If you are a whistleblower, you used to have to worry about your search history or the books you checked out from the library. Now, if you are using a localized A I model, one that runs on your own hardware without sending data to the cloud, you can do all your research and drafting in a completely air-gapped environment. You can ask the A I for facts or to summarize documents without ever touching the open internet.

Corn

It is like a digital version of the old trope where the spy writes their secret message in a room with no windows. But let us look at the other side of this. If it is easier to be anonymous, does that mean we are going to see a flood of low-quality or even malicious pseudonymous content?

Herman

We are already seeing it. If you go on Amazon today, there are thousands of books that are clearly AI-generated, often published under fake names with fake biographies. It is becoming harder for readers to know who they can trust. When anyone can create a plausible-sounding expert persona in an afternoon, the value of a verified identity actually goes up. We are seeing the rise of the virtual author, where the entire persona is a synthetic creation.

Corn

It is a bit of a paradox. As anonymity becomes easier and more robust, the premium on a known, trusted identity increases. It is like what we discussed last week in episode two hundred sixty-eight about the AI paradox. The more ubiquitous the technology becomes, the more we value the human element that can't be easily replicated.

Herman

That is a great connection. And it leads to an interesting trend in the publishing industry. We are seeing more authors who are what I call semi-pseudonymous. They have a public face, but they use different names for different genres to manage expectations. Like how Stephen King used Richard Bachman.

Corn

King's reason for that was so interesting. He wanted to see if he could replicate his success without his famous name. He wanted to know if it was his talent or just his brand that was selling books.

Herman

And he found out it was a bit of both. Bachman's books sold okay, but they did not become blockbusters until the secret was out. That tells you a lot about the power of a brand in publishing. For most authors, a pseudonym is not about hiding from the law; it is about building a specific brand for a specific audience. It is about creative freedom. You can write a steamy romance under one name and a gritty thriller under another without confusing your readers.

Corn

Let us talk about the practical side for a second. If someone listening wants to try this, maybe not to blow the whistle on a government, but just to explore a different side of their writing like Daniel did. What are the actual steps in twenty twenty six?

Herman

First, you need to decide on the level of anonymity you need. If it is just for fun or a specific genre, a simple pen name on Amazon is fine. You just enter the pen name in the author field when you upload your manuscript. Amazon will still have your real info for payments, but the public only sees the pen name. You should also set up a separate Author Central account for that pen name to keep the data separate.

Corn

But if you want to be more serious about it? If you are worried about someone digging into your background?

Herman

Then you look into setting up a Doing Business As name, or a D B A. In many places, you can register a business name that is tied to your personal identity but allows you to open a bank account in that name. It adds a layer of professional distance. If you need even more privacy, you go the L L C route we mentioned, ideally in a jurisdiction like Wyoming or New Mexico. And you have to be very careful with your metadata. When you save a Word document or a P D F, it often embeds your real name in the file properties. You have to scrub that before you upload anything.

Corn

And what about the marketing? Daniel was asking about how you promote a book when you can't show your face. You can't exactly go on a book tour or do a signing at a local shop.

Herman

That is the biggest hurdle for pseudonymous authors. You have to be a digital native. You build a persona on social media. You use an AI-generated avatar or a specific style of graphic design. You engage with your audience entirely through text or maybe a voice-modulated podcast. We are seeing authors use AI voice clones to do interviews without revealing their true voice.

Corn

Voice modulation. That is another layer of the AI mask. You could literally do an interview as your persona and no one would recognize your voice. It is like the digital version of the witness protection program interviews with the blurred face and the deep voice.

Herman

Exactly. We have reached a point where a persona can be entirely synthetic but still feel very real to an audience. But you have to be consistent. If your persona is a gruff, seventy-year-old retired detective, you have to maintain that voice in every tweet and every newsletter. If you slip up and use a Gen Z slang term, the illusion is shattered.

Corn

It sounds like a lot of work. You are essentially acting a part twenty-four seven.

Herman

It is a performance. And that is why many people eventually drop the mask. It is exhausting to live a double life, even a digital one. But for some, the freedom it provides is worth it. You can explore themes or opinions that might be controversial in your real life. You can escape the pigeonhole that your previous work or your professional reputation has put you in. Think about a high-powered lawyer who wants to write cozy mysteries about cats. They might not want their clients to know about their feline-themed hobby.

Corn

I want to go back to the whistleblower aspect for a moment, because that feels like the most consequential use of this. If we are in a world where AI can both help you hide and help others find you, who is winning that arms race right now?

Herman

It is a classic cat and mouse game. On one hand, you have tools like GPT-Zero or other A I detectors that try to identify if a text was written by an A I or if it matches a certain style. On the other hand, you have more sophisticated L L Ms that are getting better at mimicry and style-shifting. Right now, I would say the advantage is slightly with the author, provided they are technically savvy. It is always easier to create noise than it is to filter it out perfectly.

Corn

But as we know from history, it usually isn't the technology that fails; it is the human. Someone tells a friend, or they use the same email address for their pen name that they use for their Netflix account.

Herman

Exactly. Operational security, or O P S E C, is almost always where people trip up. You can have the most sophisticated A I-masked prose in the world, but if you upload the file from your home I P address without a V P N, you have already left a digital footprint. Or think about the Reality Winner case. She was caught because the document she printed and mailed to a news outlet had tiny, nearly invisible yellow dots that identified the specific printer and the time it was printed. Your physical environment can betray you just as easily as your digital one.

Corn

It reminds me of the story of the Silk Road founder, Ross Ulbricht. He was caught partly because of a post he made on a forum years earlier using his real name, which was linked to an email he used for the site. One tiny slip-up in a decade of work. Anonymity is a marathon, not a sprint.

Herman

That is the reality of anonymity in the digital age. It is not a state of being; it is a constant, active process. You have to be perfect every single time, while the people trying to find you only have to be lucky once. But for many, the stakes are worth it. Pseudonymous publishing has a long and honorable history of challenging power and expanding the boundaries of what can be said.

Corn

I agree. And it is fascinating to see how the tools have evolved from a simple pen and a different name to complex A I models and legal structures. It makes me wonder what the next step is. Are we going to see fully autonomous A I authors that don't even have a human behind them? A I agents that manage their own bank accounts and publishing schedules?

Herman

We are already seeing the beginnings of that with decentralized autonomous organizations, or D A Os. You could have an A I agent that is funded by a D A O, writes books, sells them, and uses the profits to pay for its own server costs. The question of authorship is going to get very blurry. If a human gives an A I a prompt, and the A I writes a book, who is the author? And if that A I is using a pseudonym, does the human still have the same legal liabilities? Our current legal framework is totally unprepared for a world where the author might not even be a person.

Corn

That sounds like a topic for a whole other episode. The legal status of A I-generated personas. I can already see the steam coming out of your ears thinking about the copyright implications.

Herman

Oh, I could go deep on that. Most copyright laws require a human author. If there is no human, can the work even be protected? It is a mess, and I love it. It is the frontier of law and technology.

Corn

I knew you would. But let us bring it back to the here and now. For our listeners who are thinking about this, what is the main takeaway?

Herman

I think the main takeaway is that your identity is more than just your name. It is your style, your habits, and your digital footprint. If you want to publish pseudonymously, you have to think about all those layers. AI is a powerful tool to help you, but it is not a magic wand. You still need to be careful, and you still need to have something worth saying. The most successful pseudonym in history is probably Satoshi Nakamoto, the creator of Bitcoin. To this day, nobody knows for sure who they are. They managed to launch a global financial revolution while remaining completely anonymous. That is the gold standard.

Corn

Well put. And if you are just doing it to prank your family like Daniel, maybe don't worry about the stylometry as much. Just enjoy the creative freedom of being someone else for a while. It is a great way to stretch your writing muscles.

Herman

Exactly. Write that brush, over the top persona. Explore a version of yourself that doesn't exist in the real world. That is one of the great joys of writing, after all. It is a form of play.

Corn

It really is. This has been a great deep dive. I feel like I understand the bookshelf in the living room a bit better now. Every book has a story, but sometimes the story of who wrote it is the most interesting part of all.

Herman

And I have a few more papers on stylometry I need to send you. There is some fascinating new research on using AI to detect the emotional state of an anonymous author. It is really groundbreaking stuff.

Corn

I am sure you do, Herman. I will add them to my reading list. Before we wrap up, I want to say a huge thank you to everyone who has been listening. We have been doing this for two hundred sixty-nine episodes now, and the community that has grown around My Weird Prompts is just incredible.

Herman

It really is. We love getting these prompts from Daniel and hearing from all of you. It keeps us on our toes and always learning something new. Your curiosity is what drives this show.

Corn

And hey, if you are enjoying the show, we would really appreciate it if you could take a moment to leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other people find the show and allows us to keep going down these rabbit holes. It is the best way to support what we do.

Herman

Yeah, a quick rating or a few words makes a big difference. We read them all, and we really value the feedback. It helps us decide which topics to dive into next.

Corn

You can find all our past episodes and a contact form if you want to send us your own weird prompts at myweirdprompts.com. We are also on Spotify, so make sure to follow us there for the latest updates. We have some great episodes coming up in the next few weeks.

Herman

Thanks again to Daniel for this one. It was a blast to dig into. It really combined my love of history, law, and tech.

Corn

Definitely. Until next time, I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

Thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. We will see you in the next one.

Herman

Stay curious, everyone! And maybe try out a pen name this weekend.

Corn

So, Herman, if you were going to write under a pseudonym, what would your pen name be? You mentioned Barnaby McSniff earlier, but is that the one?

Herman

Oh, that was just a placeholder. My real pen name would be Barnaby Q Thistlethwaite.

Corn

Thistlethwaite? Really? That is a mouthful.

Herman

It has a certain gravitas, don't you think? Very nineteenth-century academic. It sounds like someone who has a very large collection of rare beetles and a very small social circle.

Corn

It sounds like someone who would spend all day in a library and never see the sun. It sounds like someone who uses a fountain pen and refuses to use a computer.

Herman

So, basically me then? Just with a better name?

Corn

Fair point. I think I would go with something simpler. Maybe just The Sloth. It sets the right expectations for my productivity levels.

Herman

A bit on the nose, isn't it? People might think the book was written by an actual sloth.

Corn

Hey, it's a brand. People know what they are getting. Slow, thoughtful, and probably a bit sleepy. It is an honest persona.

Herman

I think I will stick with Barnaby. It has more flair. And I think I'll start working on my first Thistlethwaite manuscript tonight.

Corn

Suit yourself, Barnaby. Let's get out of here. I need a nap before I start my life as The Sloth.

Herman

After you, Mr Sloth. Don't fall asleep on the way to the car.

Corn

Actually, I think I'll just stay here for a bit. Moving is overrated. I'll just wait for the car to come to me.

Herman

Typical. See you later, Corn.

Corn

Bye, Herman. Thanks again, everyone. Talk soon.