

## **Vivienne Ming – Unlocking Human Potential with AI**

Host: Maggie John

### **Overview:**

Dr. Vivienne Ming offers a glimpse into her keynote address at Magnet Network Live. Dr. Ming is a theoretical neuroscientist, entrepreneur, and the co-founder of Socos Labs. Her AI inventions have launched a dozen companies and nonprofits focused on human potential in education, workforce, and health. Dr. Ming explains her idea that we need to challenge ourselves with AI, not simply using it to make life easier, but harder, by having it create “productive friction that makes us better.”

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. Ming says we need to use AI “as our Socrates” to ask us the questions we’ve been “hiding from ourselves.”
2. She asks us to consider what humanity is uniquely good at that AI isn’t.
3. Ming says a great life “goes deep,” is engaged, and is willing to be wrong in order to learn and find something new.

### **MAGGIE:**

Thank you for joining us. It is Magnet Network Live. I'm your host, Maggie John, and we're joined by Vivienne Ming. She is a theoretical neuroscientist, entrepreneur, and co-founder of Socos Labs, a think tank that uses AI to address complex social issues. Her work focuses on the intersection of human potential, AI, and technology, exploring how AI can be used to improve education, work, and human development. Welcome, Vivienne.

### **VIVIENNE:**

It's lovely to be here. Thank you for having me.

**MAGGIE:**

I've heard great things about your talk this morning. Can you share a little bit about what you shared with the group this morning?

**VIVIENNE:**

Oh, God, I didn't think I'd be quizzed on my own quiz topic. So I was talking about this big nerdy idea of collective intelligence. What does it take to find the smartest teams? Maybe more valuable to build the smartest teams? And is there a role for artificial intelligence in doing this? And I think the thing I tried to get across in my keynote this morning was that we need to do more than find those easy things. Sometimes there is this idea of AI will take care of those boring things so we can focus on what's really important.

**MAGGIE:**

The exciting things, yeah.

**VIVENNE:**

There's two big issues. One is it's sort of what I call this AI bait and switch. The idea that AI is going to free all of us up to be artists and doctors and scientists. You know, I might believe that if there was a line to get into every library. You know, you can be an artist today. Nobody pays you either way. So go be an artist. The switch in that is what I call deprofessionalization, that you can use AI to do these amazing things. You can also use it to take care of that lazy stuff, have it write an email for you, have it grade your students' homework for you, all that stuff that was so boring and it took so much time. Except if you think what's now going to happen is you're going to go do amazing superhuman things. In reality, the CFO of your company is probably going to look at the bottom line and say, well, geez, why do we have a university educated, very expensive human being doing this job? Why don't we just hire a high school dropout to do it instead? So this is what we call deprofessionalization. And that's the switch in the AI bait and switch.

**MAGGIE:**

Yeah.

**VIVIENNE:**

But it doesn't have to be that way. So I hope that doesn't sound entirely dismal. All I really mean is we have a choice. We can challenge ourselves to be Better. We could use AI to do the things. I'm gonna be honest here, we don't really want to do because they're hard yeah or we can have it do those easy things and then we sit back and relax and my keynote today was saying both as individuals and as communities we need to challenge ourselves. We really need to say how can AI help me find the places I'm hiding from myself how can I use it as I described on stage I'm finishing up I'm writing three books because if you've never published a book smart starting point is do three of them okay, but I got myself into this now I gotta write my way out of it and boy it would be easy to just say GPT Claude write my book right my first response to that is it's so banal it can write the book, but it doesn't have any character. It's the book anybody else would write. Boy, in a world with AI in it, your unique value is your unique voice. Why would you ever give that away to a computer?

**MAGGIE:**

Am I hearing you say also, Vivian, that if we utilize AI well, we can push aside the banal, the ordinary, and really delve into our potential. Maybe the things that have been hidden within us have been, you know, because we've been so overwhelmed by doing this, the ordinary and the banal, sending out the emails, that we might discover more of who we are and how we can contribute better to society.

**VIVIENNE:**

It'd be easy for an alien coming here to think that our job is pushing email, you know, and famously cleaning up poop from dogs if it's what you spend all of your time doing. But, you know, the interesting thing is my lesson there is, boy, we probably shouldn't be writing those emails. If an AI could do it as well as we are, why am I doing it at all? What am I uniquely good at? So we get asked the big question, what is humanity uniquely good at that AI is not? And then there's a more nuanced and

maybe even more powerful question, which is, given that, well, what am I uniquely good at, not just with respect to AI, but with respect to everybody else? And that sounds very philosophical. So let's get super grounded. I'm working on these books, and I'm not going to let AI write them for me. So here's what I do instead. Gemini, that's Google's thing. I have a long history collaborating with them. So for arbitrary reasons, I use it. You are now my enemy, my nemesis. For my entire career, you've pointed out every mistake I've made. You've explained to the public where I'm wrong. Here's the chapter of my new book. Tell me where I'm wrong and walk me through it in excruciating detail. I don't want to use AI to make my life easier. I want to use it to make it harder. I want to challenge myself. Show me where I'm mistaken and why. And then what I need to find in myself is interesting enough where to push back and where to lean in.

**MAGGIE:**

That is very countercultural to the conversations that we're hearing about AI.

**VIVENNE:**

One hundred percent. And yet, as I used something of a metaphor on stage, it was students... Not every student loves getting educated. But if given a choice, they overwhelmingly engage in what we call passive learning. Sit in a lecture hall here versus active learning, the most famous of which would be Socratic, you know, asking people questions. Here's the interesting thing. You could think those students are just being lazy. But interestingly enough, the teachers don't love active either. It's genuinely harder. But actually, here's what really drives those students. They think they've learned less. Even though they demonstrably learn vastly more in an active learning context, they think they've learned less because their misunderstandings and their gaps have been pointed out to them. So even as they learn more, they feel like they've learned less. We need to use AI as our Socrates to ask us the questions we've been hiding from ourselves. And again, that sounds philosophical. The nice thing about my career is I run, I foolishly start a bunch of companies because I can't seem to learn the lesson that I'm a terrible entrepreneur. I've been able to ruin so many good business ideas with a little heart. But I start these philanthropies where I just ask people to bring me challenging problems. And if I thank my team and I can

help, I pay for everything. Whatever we invent, we give away. And this ranges from kids with epilepsy, moms with bipolar disorder, my own son with diabetes, to Kenya saying we did everything the World Bank told us to do, our standardized test scores for our students go up every year, and still no one wants to hire our citizens. Dr. Ming, please help. And again, and this is kind of alluding to what I said before, if I think my team and I have a unique insight to offer that problem, then it's the most expensive job, but the best job in the world. I just get to help. We only work on problems about people. I can nerd out about a lot of things, but I'm only interested in making better people. And I think one of those things we miss, whether it's just in passing in our daily lives on TikTok or Instagram, when you're swiping...I'm a nerd, so I'll put it this way, 200 milliseconds, swipe, swipe, about as long as it takes your visual system to process that image and then decide, nope, and you're out. We did an analysis and we looked at these adolescent girls. Sure, a couple swipes, but then they'd stop. And then they'd go look something up. And they'd come back and look at the picture again. And then they'd go look something up on another site. All about the picture. Why do I like this? Why do I not like this? What's interesting about that, those girls versus the others, and in particular girls, those other girls show some fairly substantial... I know there's a lot of debate around whether social networks are bad or not, you know, like there's debate around climate change and whether lead paint is bad for you. Always be suspicious when someone stands to make a lot of money off of something. So I don't think intrinsically against social networks, but the evidence to me is very compelling, particularly adolescent girls really suffer psychologically and academically. But not these girls. They're on social media just as much as their peers. But rather than going shallow, swipe, swipe, swipe, they were going deep,

**MAGGIE:**

They're questioning what they see.

**VIVIENNE:**

Why do I like this? What is interesting? How would I make something like this? When they're on social media just as much as their peers, they look great. They show none of the negative effects. Look at senior citizens online. They could be passively

streaming some shows off Netflix. Or they could be exploring. Maybe they can't get around the way they used to. Normally, that kind of mobility limitation is like a death knell. You're just counting the clock until it's all done. Well, what about older people that have mobility limitations, but while they may not be exploring the physical world, they're exploring the Internet. They look like people that have no mobility limitation. They look great. And so these lessons, which have nothing to do with AI, point us to what a great life looks like. It's one that goes deep, that's engaged. It's one that's not only willing to be wrong, it understands that it has to be to find something new and offer a unique voice to the world. If we can rethink AI, whether you want to think about it in terms of the future of work or education or just your life, how can AI challenge me? Or as we call it in my research, productive friction. How can it add a little friction to my life that actually makes me better, not worse?

**MAGGIE:**

I'm going to leave it there. That is a question for the ages. Thank you, Vivienne.

**VIVIENNE:**

A real pleasure. Thank you.

**MAGGIE:**

That was Vivienne Ming. She is the co-founder of Socos Labs.