

Opinion: Bloomberg Law tried to suppress its erroneous Labor Dept. story

Opinion by Erik Wemple

Media critic

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News organizations commonly request that their staffers promote their stories on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. And why not — the idea, after all, is to secure a large audience for the scoops and analysis in which the outlet takes such pride.

Now look at how an editor at Bloomberg Law instructed staffers to handle an upcoming story on a Labor Department appointee:

You may have heard that Leif Olson, the subject of our story yesterday, will rejoin the Labor Department. The agency announced it this morning, and we are about to post a story on it.

Please do not tweet out the story or about the story (or use any other social media to post anything). And really, please do not tweet even generally about Leif Olson coming back to the department, or engage with anyone on social media about it. That is only likely to invite more twitter-rage.

That directive went out on Wednesday night to labor staffers at Bloomberg Law. Why all the fuss to suppress a story about Olson? Bloomberg Law has some incentives on that front. On Tuesday, it published what reporter Ben Penn advertised as a “scoop”: Namely, that the Labor Department had accepted the resignation of Olson, a senior policy adviser in the department’s wage and hour division. That announcement came after Penn had alerted the Labor Department to allegedly anti-Semitic messages that Olson had posted to Facebook back in August 2016.

SCOOP: Trump Labor Department's new sr adviser Leif Olson posted on Facebook that Jewish media "protect their own." In response to my request for comment on Olson's anti-Semitic post, [@USDOL](#) says they've accepted his resignation. <https://t.co/68kDvaFn0h>

— Ben Penn (@benjaminpenn) [September 3, 2019](#)

The headline on Tuesday’s story: “Trump Labor Aide Quits After Anti-Semitic Facebook Posts Surface.”

Problem: Those “anti-Semitic” messages were satirical jabs at anti-Semitism, rendering them anti-anti-Semitic. Even so: An official with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) condemned the post, and the Labor Department announced that it had accepted Olson’s resignation. Social media roared at the madness.

As folks read the actual post, sanity made a comeback. The ADL renounced its own condemnation. And the Labor Department announced the reinstatement of Olson: “On Friday, August 30, 2019, Senior Policy Advisor of the Wage and Hour Division, Leif Olson offered his resignation and the Department accepted. Following a thorough reexamination of the available information and upon reflection, the Department has concluded that Mr. Olson has satisfactorily explained the tone of the content of his sarcastic social media posts and will return to his position in the Wage and Hour Division.”

Bloomberg Law responded by writing a fresh story. It also adjusted the initial, erroneous story with its headline about “Anti-Semitic Facebook Posts.” In place of that headline came a more accurate formulation: “Trump Labor Aide Quits After Facebook Posts Surface (Corrected).” As for the “corrected” part, Bloomberg Law signaled the changes to the article with this italicized text: *“In light of the subsequent events, we removed ‘Anti-Semitic’ from the headline and clarified Olson’s reference to those tropes.”*

Readers with no grounding in this unfortunate sequence might emerge mystified as to how this all happened. For instance, the new headline suggests that this Facebook post magically surfaced, as opposed to the actual circumstances: Bloomberg Law dug it up and presented it to the Labor Department. Nor does the italicized text provide any hint that those “subsequent events” consisted of the world trying to clean up the mess left by Bloomberg Law.

Though Bloomberg Law fixed the most egregious falsehood in the story — regarding anti-Semitism, that is — it has left standing some absurd stretches of text. Consider this stuff, about how the Trump administration evaluates prospective hires:

Olson’s arrival at the agency, which was quietly noted in an online WHD organization chart, raises more questions about the Trump administration’s vetting system for political appointees.

The White House Presidential Personnel Office came under fire after a 2018 Washington Post article chronicled the office’s frat-house atmosphere filled with young, inexperienced former Trump campaign aides. More broadly, the Trump administration’s personnel clearance process has been criticized for not flagging various executive branch officials and nominees with checkered histories.

Actually: Olson’s story raises *no* questions about the Trump administration’s personnel-vetting procedures. It raises questions about Bloomberg Law’s story-vetting procedures.

No wonder it didn’t want anyone to read anything more about Olson! The Erik Wemple Blog has asked Bloomberg Law some questions about the no-tweet instructions, which were referenced by CNN’s Oliver Darcy. The outlet declined to comment

comment.

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