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Linda McMahon Campaign Leaks HuffPost Reporter's Emails To Bolster Its Ethical Bona Fides

By Ryan Grim & Sam Stein - October 7th, 2012

WASHINGTON -- Did former pro-wrestling magnate Linda McMahon essentially plagiarize large portions of her jobs plan from national GOP lawmakers and organizations? It's a question that has bubbled to the surface of Connecticut's heated Senate campaign -- and it's one that injected HuffPost, involuntarily, into the center of the issue.

"Entire paragraphs and entire sentences" were "lifted from the House Republican website, the Cato Institute," Rep. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) charged during his Sunday morning debate against McMahon. "It's a plan that was essentially written by people in Washington who have ideology as their primary concern."

McMahon was ready. "Shame on you. You have just accused me of plagiarizing my plan, it is beneath you," she said, adding, "You know very well that my plan is my own. I have sought the expert opinion of those outside to get the brightest and the best, and every word of that has been cited, either in the online plan or in print."

Earlier in the week, a Democratic source had tipped The Huffington Post's Amanda Terkel off to the alleged plagiarism. The source noted that until recently, portions of McMahon's website touting her jobs plan did not have the proper citations. (Here's an example of a cached portion of her jobs plan without citations, and here is the updated version of the page, with the citations added.)

Like we do with most tips, we followed it up. Terkel reached out to the McMahon campaign to get its side of the story, noting that the Murphy campaign had been making the charges.

That query led to a nasty, profanity-laced, off-the-record phone call from McMahon campaign manager Corry Bliss to Terkel on Saturday afternoon. He asserted that the print and pdf versions of McMahon's plan have had the proper citations all along, so the charges of plagiarism were baseless.

The topic is heated in Connecticut, because in 2010, during her first Senate campaign, McMahon accused her GOP primary opponent of plagiarism, noting that he did not credit a business advocacy group in his economic plan but used its exact talking points.

So while not nefarious, the fact that McMahon's website previously failed to credit its sources was sloppy work on the part of her campaign staffers, knowing they should have taken extra precautions to be transparent in light of the charges she made two years ago.

Terkel wrote back to Bliss, telling him that since the site now listed its sources, she had decided not to write the story, considering it too minor to warrant the exposure. She also said that, given his inappropriate behavior on the call, she would no longer conduct any correspondence with him on an off-the-record basis, as a way to protect herself from such a barrage in the future.

In response, he leaked her email. Except not all of it: Bliss notably left out her links to the campaign website before it included citations.

The McMahon campaign sent her email to a Connecticut blogger, and then blasted it out in a press release. Here's the email as it was published:

Cory,

First off -- we're not off the record, and I won't go off the record again with you on this after the way you spoke to me on the phone.

Below are the cached pages to the portions of Linda's website without the citations -- although on her site, I notice they now have citations, so I assume that was changed at some point.

After you so politely informed me that the print version/pdf of her plan has had the citations all along, I won't be writing the story. (See how easy that was?)

Hope you have a wonderful day, and take a few deep breaths and listen to Enya or something.

-Amanda

The McMahon campaign has since reproduced a tiny portion of the email on its website -- the part where Terkel says Bliss "so politely informed" her that the citations had been included. Taken out of context, it's unclear that she was being sarcastic in referring to his behavior as polite.

The campaign also published part of Terkel's initial email, asking for a response to the Murphy campaign's charge.

Bliss has been with the McMahon campaign for more than a year, and according to the *Hartford Courant*, he "practices an aggressive, hard-hitting brand of politics that critics say is ripped from the playbook of Karl Rove." In the past, Bliss has run campaigns notable for their "nastiness" and "blatant ugliness." In Connecticut, he "has set the pace of the increasingly bitter race," the paper reports.

When Terkel told McMahon spokesman Todd Abrajano that HuffPost planned to write about the campaign's practice of leaking reporters' emails, he responded: "No, we don't leak reporter emails, but we consider you to be a far-left liberal blogger, not a real reporter."

Setting aside the contradiction in terms -- one can't be far-left and liberal at the same time, unless he meant in the sense of John Stuart Mill -- Terkel is of course a reporter, and one of the best in Washington. Regardless, while every communication between a reporter and a source is considered on the record, unless explicitly said to be on background or off the record, leaking such correspondence violates long-standing norms and practices, and breaks the trust that allows campaigns and reporters to interact in a non-adversarial way.

Getting shouted at by operatives looking to win better coverage for their bosses might as well be listed in the job description of political journalist. And Terkel knows how to deal with a bully -- just ask Bill O'Reilly. But Bliss' behavior, from beginning to end, went far beyond what we've seen from political actors on either side of the aisle. It's little surprise that his Senate race has become such an embarrassing, chair-throwing affair.

That Bliss did all this to make the case that the McMahon campaign has behaved ethically in a different realm is of course lost on nobody. Meanwhile, the campaign continues to criticize its opponent for engaging in "personal attacks." Okay.