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As an EPA intern, I was barred from mentioning climate change

I helped manage the social media accounts — and saw firsthand why the staff is demoralized.



By Katie Miller January 3

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In many ways, the Environmental Protection Agency was exactly what I expected when I arrived as a summer intern in June: cubicles decorated with pictures of polar bears, employees who made actual small talk about the environment, acronyms for everything. But there were clues that this was an agency under siege in the Trump administration, and before my time there had ended, I saw them firsthand.

Just under the surface, fear and loathing had taken hold. My colleagues lowered their voices to discuss political matters, but they talked openly about “before” and “after,” referring to the inauguration. Some seemed to put on a mask at work, clenching their teeth and smiling every time the new administration came up in conversation. One man told me he’d worked at the EPA during many administrations and had never felt so discouraged. No wonder more than 700 people, including more than 200 scientists, have left since President Trump took office.

After an orientation with the other summer interns, I focused on my work on the communications team for the Office of Resource Conservation and Recovery, part of the Office of Land and Emergency Management. My first job was to update the titles and summaries of Federal Register notices using plain language and an active voice. I spent time entering numbers into an Excel spreadsheet. I responded to citizen inquiries, edited documents, made calls, attended meetings. Intern stuff.

One day, a co-worker asked me to draft tweets that the EPA could post on holidays, ranging from Valentine’s Day to

Halloween; I was to look at old tweets for ideas and new social media posts for guidance. The idea behind these tweets is to remind people that an environmentally friendly lifestyle is easy to adopt and can be practiced year-round, not just on Earth Day. But my co-worker also transmitted this instruction: Don't mention climate change or going "green," but instead write about "conserving energy" or "saving money." It wasn't clear whether this instruction had come from above or whether my group merely anticipated opposition to those concepts.

Combing through the old tweets, I noticed that some had links to the EPA's information on climate change, but the links were now dead. I had to leave the links out of my draft tweets, erasing paths that citizens had once been able to follow to learn about the science. I understood that policies change from administration to administration, but could science, based on years of research, really become outdated, too?

I was also asked to look at the EPA's Instagram account to get a sense of what the agency wanted to focus on in its social media. Under the Obama administration, many images on the account featured EPA employees from across the country, as well as Superfund sites turned into parks — and even scientist Bill Nye . Under the new administration, EPA chief Scott Pruitt appeared in every picture or video through the first months — often with one of his quotes, such as "We as a nation can be both pro energy and jobs and pro environment. . . . We don't have to choose between the two." (Since then, the images have been more varied, though many still show Pruitt.)

I assumed that many of my peers were like me — college students in search of career-enhancing internships who didn't vote for Trump and oppose many of his policies, but applied to agencies we hoped might one day offer meaningful careers. I wondered if others were feeling the same sense of disorientation. When I asked, I found that many were doing routine tasks: compiling and analyzing data about recycling, gathering information about Superfund sites, helping to edit a document about waste management trends in America. These interns told me that the policy shifts under Trump weren't particularly noticeable in their positions. That wasn't true for me — in my work, the impact was impossible to miss. I was helping to communicate the EPA's goals to the public. And those goals were no longer about putting the environment first, especially if doing so would affect American industries.

For many of my fellow interns, the summer was a brief, endurable excursion into the Trump administration. They may not have agreed with the policies they were helping at the margins to implement, but they didn't challenge them overtly. I didn't think that would work for me.

One day, I received an email addressed to all interns announcing that Pruitt would be meeting with us. When I told career employees I worked with about the meeting, they were supportive, though several noted that he didn't seem interested in meeting with them. The big day arrived, and a fellow intern and I took a bus from our Arlington, Va., office to the main building downtown. We were escorted to the sixth floor, where Pruitt works most of the time. The curtains were drawn, and on a table off to one side, ice cream sat collecting condensation. While we waited, more than 50 other interns filled the room. Our uncertain whispers grew into a dull roar.

My colleague tapped me on the shoulder. “There he is,” she said. I held my breath and spun around. Pruitt came through the doorway, and a crowd of interns flocked around him. I stood back, building up the courage to speak to him. “Nice to meet you, I’m Scott,” he said when I approached. He asked what branch I was working for. “Oh, so you’re with Barry Breen at OLEM. Are you working on the Superfund project?” Pruitt planned on cutting a ton of funding for that project.

“No,” I said. “I’m working on social media. And I actually have a question for you.” He smiled, and the interns surrounding us leaned in. “So, part of my job as an intern has been to remove any mention of climate change from social media accounts. What is the reasoning behind taking information away from the public, instead of allowing them to see it and come to their own conclusions?”

He paused for a brief second. “No, I think that actually we’re trying to start a discussion about it.” I rephrased my question, and he gave me an equally dissatisfying answer, referring me to his assistant. (Two interns who were there with me confirmed my recollection.) But I was still glad I asked. At an event where Pruitt appeared to expect polite encounters from awed interns, I caught him off guard.

After he left, the interns gathered for a question-and-answer session with career employees. They each gave short speeches thanking us for our work, asking us to come back one day and telling us about how some of them found jobs at the EPA out of college. Then an intern posed a tough question: How could the EPA assure us that we might even have a chance to return someday as full-time employees, considering the looming budget cuts and ongoing hiring freeze? They told us that, at least for the next few years, our support and interest alone would be very important to the agency, but they couldn’t make any promises.

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