

Bloggers fighting government regulations

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Bloggers who built their Internet followings with anti-establishment prose are now lobbying the establishment to protect their livelihoods from federal regulations.

Some are even working with lawyers, public-relations consultants and a political action committee to do it.

"I like to think of myself as just a guy with a blog, but it's clear that 'just a guy with a blog' is different today than it was when I started three years ago," said Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, founder of the Web log www.DailyKos.com. "One sign of having arrived is when government regulators start wanting to poke their fingers into what you do."

Moulitsas was to testify Tuesday at a hearing on a Federal Election Commission proposal that would extend some campaign finance rules to the Internet, including bloggers.

Moulitsas also is working with a lawyer who volunteered to help bloggers fight new government regulations and whose efforts were promoted in a PR firm press release Monday. He is prepared to lobby Congress himself if necessary, and he is the treasurer of BlogPac, a political action committee formed last year by bloggers.

Duncan Black - who founded the www.atrios.blogspot.com blog - featured a headline Monday on his Web site, "Bite me, Congressman," that linked to a diatribe against a Republican House committee chairman over global warming.

Asked whether the use of hearing testimony and PACs is a sign that bloggers are succumbing to mainstream political techniques, Black said he and his colleagues have no choice.

"I think once you do achieve a certain degree of traffic, influence, notoriety - however you want to call it - eventually the outsider label is not perfectly applicable anymore," said Black, who describes himself as a "recovering economist." He too planned to testify before the FEC.

Federal election officials until now have steered clear of Internet oversight, siding with bloggers and other online activists who portray the Web as a laboratory of grass-roots political participation and an outlet for free speech that should develop unhampered by the government.

But online political activity has become increasingly more sophisticated since the FEC last examined it a few elections ago.

Since the 2000 presidential campaign, when Arizona Sen. John McCain made a splash by raising millions online, candidates have raised tens of millions of dollars, and online political ads, consultants and organizing have become

commonplace. Political parties and campaigns have added blogging to their Web sites.

A survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that just over one-third of U.S. adults went to the Internet during the 2004 elections to get political news, share their views on candidates or issues, volunteer for a campaign, or make a political donation.

Internet advertising is also big business, and it's becoming a standard feature of blogs. Black said a small number of bloggers make a living from advertising revenue, but he added that most, including himself, have other jobs.

Acknowledging the Internet's growth, a federal judge last year ordered the FEC to extend some of the nation's campaign finance and spending limits to political activity on the Web.

Bloggers fear that will mean new, unique limits on their activities, even though several of the commission's six members have indicated they have no desire to go beyond what the judge has ordered them to do.

The FEC plans this summer to decide how far to go. Bloggers view whatever happens at the commission as just the first step in their quest to remain free of government oversight.

"The FEC isn't the end of it," Moulitsas said. "We still have Congress, and beyond Congress we still have the courts."

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