



## Inside Legal Blogs

[By Brooke Chappell]

I hope all of my readers know that they can't trust anything said on the Internet. Cue the long and not very funny routine about whether that means you can't trust me. But of course you know all that - you're lawyers.

In one of his last articles, my predecessor *mentioned* surrounding the website *DontDateHimGirl* unsurprisingly getting some guys' knickers in a twist. One of them was an attorney. *Wacky hijinks* ensued. This week, *Legal Blog Watch reported* that Ireland has its very own twist on a similar idea: *RateYourSolicitor.com*, where clients can voice their opinions on the legal professionals in their lives. Is anyone shocked that some of the worst ratings for firms may be traceable to disgruntled former associates? No? Didn't think so.

In the interests of adding a little more goodwill towards man to this article, behold a blawg that hasn't even officially launched yet, but which people are already linking to. The amusingly-if-cutesily-named *shlep: the Self-Help Law ExPress*, hosted by Harvard Law, is still in "pre-launch status" while editor David Giacalone *looks for more help with the site*. You may know Giacalone from *f/k/a* (which stands for, and was, "Formerly Known As" the weblog named *ethicalEsq*); a frequent complaint at those sites has been the unhelpfulness of the legal profession in promoting Self-Help Law, so despite having insufficient time or expertise to run the thing by himself, he's started *shlep* as a gateway and information source for *pro se* litigants. That is, he's built the site, and is now waiting for "them" to come, "them" being:

"*Pro se* practitioners; law librarians; and lawyers, law professors or students committed to achieving access to justice for all Americans (especially through the use of assisted self-help programs and information technology),"

All of whom *are invited to contact him* if they want to contribute. Carolyn Elefant of *MyShingle* has been standing on her corner waving a *signboard for the new site*; if you've got the time, have a look and see if it's something you might be interested in helping with. Never hurts to get your name out there as a blawgger. (Well. Unless you're *Melissa Lafsky*.) Besides, as *LexisNexis* and *Legal Blog Watch* observe, a growing number of Americans get their information about legal issues from the Internet. Having that information be accurate is always helpful.

That leads me to the editorial section of this article. Concerning *my last*, I received this response from blogger Thomas Nephew, whose article on astroturfing was prominently mentioned:

"You're no doubt right that it would be naive to expect ad campaigns to be completely honest (although there are truth-in-advertising laws you doubtless know more about than I do). I think the issue with the kind of astroturfing I may have (and others definitely have) experienced is that \*you don't know it's an ad campaign.\* The fellow involved didn't state who he worked for, or whether he or his company had "money on" the political fight involved, so to speak. That's potentially deceptive and destructive; a photo of a crowd at a rally looks very different depending on whether you know the crowd was paid to be there or not. I agree with you about legal regulation in general; exposure/ ridicule/ sunshine is best,

although it may be important to require \*reporting\* of some kinds of overtly political astroturfing to the FEC or other agencies. But as you note, it can be harder for big time blogs than for little ones like mine to monitor the torrent of visits they get."

After blinking for a moment or two, thinking, "You mean people actually read these articles? Good lord," I wrote back, explaining that I do disapprove strongly of astroturfing and would, in fact, be one of those starry-eyed idealists who think the blogosphere shouldn't be allowed to be manipulated in the same way as commercial media. Which is why I brought the topic up in the first place, really. I happen to agree with all of Mr. Nephew's points (and if you're associated with one of the groups that specialize in stacking the deck that way, I waggle my finger disapprovingly in your general direction).

Trouble is, marketing manipulation is notoriously pervasive in our culture, and, having seen *The Corporation* and therefore being an expert on Such Things, I'm just enough of a cynic to doubt it's possible to keep any mass medium free of advertising influence, both stealthy and not-so-stealthy. As previously noted, everyone knows everyone (or wants to pretend they do) in the blogosphere; links spread thick and fast from one article to the next. Smaller bloggers can and should be wary of the information given in comments, as the big, influential blogs are likely to take in said information, if left unchecked, like mercury in swordfish.



(Not that I mean to say large bloggers actually devour their smaller, guppy-like brethren. You know what I mean.) That's why the astroturfing groups tend to focus their attention on the mid-range blogs, the ones that have connections with bigger bloggers and editors with slightly too much little on their hands to read through and carefully evaluate every comment received. The readership for such blogs tends to regard itself as a community, and will be more likely

to trust and accept the opinions of someone perceived as a member of that community without checking facts or attempting to find out who the person behind the comment is, or if they even exist. Of course, the same process works both ways, and when the smaller sources rant and rave - or point and laugh - the larger ones will pick it up and do the same. It's still the same groupthink behavior, but at least it's got a healthy shot of paranoia added in.

That's all for "Inside Legal Blogs" this week. Join me next week if [the Cigarette Smoking Man](#) hasn't gotten to me first. Hopefully he's too busy right now with [those aliens](#) arrested the other week working for a military contractor in Roswell.