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When Deep Fakes and Online Defamation Attack You and Your Practice

By Shannon Wilkinson

Attorneys are among those whose names, work and reputations may be attacked by deep fakes, online defamation and domain squatting.

Attorneys are often the first people contacted by clients who have reputational damage online. Your clients want to know what their legal rights are for removing negative content; how to identify the (often anonymous) attacker; and how to get it “wiped” away as quickly as possible (if that is, indeed, possible).

Now, attorneys are among those whose names, work and reputations may be attacked by deep fakes, online defamation and domain squatting. At Reputation Communications, my online reputation management practice, we have seen this and more in the last few years, in some cases created in response to cases won by attorneys, causing the losing side to vent assiduously online against the victor.

Examples include creating fake websites with harmful information on them, which pretend to be the actual law firm’s site; hijacking an attorney or law firm on social media and sending out fake tweets and posts that are malicious and profane in nature (and pretend to be the attorney or firm).

Fake Reviews a Challenge

Fake, negative online reviews by anonymous people purporting to be clients are a common challenge for both law firms and independent attorneys. When these appear prominently in

the box that appears in the top right-hand of your Google search results, it is on a platform operated by Google called “Google My Business”. That platform can be claimed by the firm; then, after being verified by Google, you have access to a dashboard where you can edit and expand the information published there. Most important, you can utilize Google’s free tools for responding to reviews, flagging clearly inappropriate ones, and eliciting new ones.

There are also review management services that help law firms track and manage their online reviews. They offer tools to monitor reviews, multiple ways to attract positive feedback from customers and the ability to publish those positive reviews on several websites.

Websites and Social Media Accounts Created To Mock an Attorney

Another issue are websites specifically created to mock an attorney or aggregating all of the attorney’s publicly available information (e.g., judgments, bankruptcies, lawsuits against the attorney) with intent to harm. Typically, these are hosted with an address almost identical to a law firm’s, but with a letter or word added, so it will appear next to the legitimate firm’s site on search results.

Perpetrators can also set up Twitter and other social accounts to mock an attorney, or to pretend to be him or her. We have seen such harassers post daily tweets that include the Twitter handles of journalists and other attorneys in the posts, as a means to promote their content and embarrass the victim. While social media platforms have systems to report such harassment, they do not always move quickly or agree that the accounts are anything other than “parody,” as Twitter responded in one such instance before more pressure was applied.

Protect Yourself and Your Firm

In my recent interview by the Beverly Hills Bar Association’s (BHBA) [“Litigation Corner”](#) YouTube series, conducted by L.A. trial attorney Hillary Johns, I discussed online reputation

management tactics attorneys and law firms can employ to build their brand capital and deflect potential reputation attacks.

There are several ways to protect yourself and your firm from such challenges. Among the examples I provided is to buy a variety of domains similar to your practice's online address. Google Domains offers this service for \$12 each domain; they can be placed on auto-renew, as well. The second is to create a personal branding website, i.e., www.yourname.com, even if your practice already has a biography and C.V. on it. Next, register the top social media usernames for yourself and your firm. That protects them from third-party use.

Publishing content like articles, blogs and videos, and using high-ranking social media accounts like Twitter and Facebook can result in high-ranking material on the first page of Google results, deflecting potentially negative, harmful harassment and other third-party content that might be posted about you.

As an example of the value of such content, a few years ago I invited Christine Rafin—then a partner at a New York City law firm focusing on commercial and civil litigation along with Internet, data privacy and security law—to write an article for my firm's digital magazine, *You(Online)*, about the legal rights U.S. consumers have when they are defamed online.

Her subsequent article, "An Attorney's Advice for Removing Negative, Defamatory and Infringing Material from the Internet," has since become such a widely-read article online that it receives over 500 hits each month.

Ms. Rafin is now General Counsel-Media, at a360 Media, LLC (and a member of my firm's Advisory Board). Her article is "evergreen"—still relevant and sought-after.

There is good news if you or one of your clients faces potentially harassing behavior online. Last June, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that Google has committed to changing its algorithm to minimize the page rank of websites that publish slanderous content, typically

sites that “solicit lurid, unverified complaints about supposed cheaters, sexual predators, deadbeats and scammers.”

Google will now remove many types of personal information online if you are unable to have a website remove it on request, including content from “sites with exploitative removal practices,” and “Doxxing” content—content exposing contact information with an intent to harm. You can learn more specifics and make a removal request at Google, at [“Google’s Request to remove your personal information on Google”](#) page. It is not a quick nor an assured solution, but it is promising.

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