



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20463

May 31, 2019

CERTIFIED MAIL
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

ADVISORY OPINION 2019-05

Craig Engle, Esq.
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Dear Mr. Engle:

We are responding to your advisory opinion request on behalf of System73 concerning the application of the Federal Election Campaign Act, 52 U.S.C. §§ 30101-45 (the “Act”), and Commission regulations to System73’s proposal to enter into license agreements with political committees for the exclusive right to livestream the committees’ events. The Commission concludes that System73’s proposal is permissible because the proposed activity is within the media exemption to the Act’s prohibition on corporate contributions.

Background

The facts presented in this advisory opinion are based on your letter received on March 20, 2019, your email received on March 21, 2019, and the supplemental material you provided on May 14, 2019.

System73 is an incorporated communications technology network. Advisory Opinion Request (AOR) at AOR001. System73 provides internet livestream and linear streaming video services to commercial clients, including several Fortune 500 companies, and has created two streaming channels as part of its business arrangements with commercial clients. AOR001-002. One channel focuses on business, finance, and investment news and analysis of technology issues. AOR002. The other covers sporting events. *Id.* Both channels involve a mix of original content, live events, and content acquired from other creators. *Id.*

In its relationships with commercial clients, System73 earns revenue from its sale to third parties of advertising time that appears during or between System73 programs. *Id.* System73 also compensates its commercial clients for the rights to stream their content. AOR015.

System73 now wants to expand its business to political committees and enter into license agreements with candidate and party committees to “broadcast their campaign appearances, rallies, debates and related events” as the “exclusive livestream provider” of a committee’s events. AOR002-003; Supplemental Material to AOR (“Supplement”) at 1. System73 may either enter into a license agreement with the political committee for the right to stream the committee’s events one at a time or enter into agreements for the rights to a series of committee events. AOR003. For example, System73 may enter into an agreement with a political committee to be the exclusive livestream provider of all of a candidate’s events in New Hampshire or Iowa. *Id.*

System73 explains that it would provide “broadcast quality online streaming services” to political committees so that the committees can “more broadly broadcast” their events. AOR002. System73 states that it “has heard concerns raised by candidates that traditional networks do not adequately cover their campaign events; that rallies of national interest are only covered in the immediate geographic market; that the quality of the video or streaming service is too low to make high quality continuous viewing desirable; or that certain constituents, such as millennials, prefer to watch political events on line, at the time they choose to, without paying a fee.” *Id.*

As with its commercial streaming arrangements, System73 would negotiate and sell advertising time to third parties for ads to appear during streaming political committee content. AOR003. Advertisers would pay System73 and would not pay the political committee. *Id.* Unlike in its agreements with commercial clients, however, System73 would not pay a political committee for the rights to livestream committee events. Supplement at 1. System73 also plans to offer “a multitude of interactive services,” Supplement at 1; *see also* AOR005, and, based on representations made by System73, will charge political committees fair market value for them.

System73 may arrange for the filming of a political committee event in any of the following ways: 1) System73 may obtain video of the event directly from the committee, 2) System73 may acquire the rights to video filmed by an independent camera operator unconnected to any political committee, or 3) System73 may use its own camera crew or enter into an agreement with a third-party camera crew to film the event. AOR005.

System73 would not exert any editorial control over the content of a committee’s event or assist committees in creating content for advertisers. AOR004. However, System73 would permit political committees to “to reserve the right to reject any particular advertiser on the basis of its taste, topic or morality.” AOR011. In addition, System73 would create “promotional materials” for its political committee programming. AOR004. Promotional materials would not advocate for or against any candidate, but may include a title card for content, introductory music, an announcer to put the upcoming event into context, and an online link where a viewer can go for more

information. *Id.* All promotional content would be owned by System73, and System73 would not provide its promotional materials to any political committee and would not seek approval of promotional materials by any political committee. AOR003, AOR015. In addition to conducting its own promotional efforts, System73 would encourage political committee clients to promote the streaming of the committee's events, for example, through tweets, website posts, or emails to supporters. AOR004. System73 has not yet made a decision about whether it would license the use of its video footage of committee events, but any license agreements that System73 enters into with political committees or third parties for the use of System73's video footage would be consistent with the terms and license rates used for System73's commercial clients. AOR015.

System73 is a privately-held company, is not owned or controlled by any candidate or political party, and plans to make its services available on a non-partisan basis. AOR004.

Question Presented

May System73 enter into a license agreement with a political committee for the exclusive right to livestream the committee's event if System73 does not make any payment to the political committee?

Legal Analysis

Yes. System73 may enter into a license agreement with a political committee for the exclusive right to livestream the committee's event if System73 does not make any payment to the committee. This activity is permissible because the proposal to livestream a committee's campaign appearance, rally, debate, or related event is within the media exemption to the Act's prohibition on corporate contributions.

Under the Act, corporations are generally prohibited from using general treasury funds to make contributions to federal candidates, federal accounts of political party committees, and other political committees.¹ 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a). Subject to certain exclusions, a contribution is "any direct or indirect payment, distribution, loan, advance, deposit, or gift of money, or any services, or anything of value" made to "any candidate, campaign committee, or political party or organization, in connection with" a federal election. 52 U.S.C. § 30118(b)(2). Commission regulations clarify that "anything of value" includes "the provision of any goods or services without charge or at a charge that is less than the usual and normal charge for the goods or services," unless the transaction is specifically permitted by regulation. 11 C.F.R. § 100.52(d)(1).

Commission regulations exclude from the definition of contribution "[a]ny cost incurred in covering or carrying a news story, commentary, or editorial by any

¹ A corporation, however, may make independent expenditures and may make contributions to nonconnected political committees that make only independent expenditures or to separate accounts maintained by nonconnected political committees for making only independent expenditures. *Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010); *Spechnow.org v. FEC*, 599 F.3d 686 (D.C. Cir. 2010); *Carey v. FEC*, 791 F.Supp.2d 121 (D.D.C. 2011).

broadcasting station (including a cable television operator, programmer or producer), Web site, newspaper, magazine, or other periodical publication, including any Internet or electronic publication . . . unless the facility is owned or controlled by any political party, political committee, or candidate.” 11 C.F.R. § 100.73; *see also* 52 U.S.C. § 30101(9)(B)(i) (excluding these types of activities from the definition of “expenditure”); 11 C.F.R. § 100.132 (same). This is known as the “press exemption” or “media exemption.” As reflected in the legislative history of the Act, this exemption was intended to ensure that the Act would not “limit or burden in any way the first amendment freedom[] of the press” and would protect “the unfettered right of the newspapers, TV networks, and other media to cover and comment on political campaigns.” H.R. Rep. No. 93-1239, 93d Cong., 2d Sess. at 4 (1974).

To determine whether the media exemption applies, the Commission uses a two-step analysis, first asking whether the entity engaging in the activity is a media entity within the meaning of the Act and Commission regulations, and if so, then asking whether the media entity: a) is owned or controlled by a political party, political committee, or candidate; and b) is acting in its capacity as a media entity in conducting the activity at issue (*i.e.*, is the activity within the entity’s “legitimate press function”). *See, e.g.*, Advisory Opinion 2016-01 (Ethiq) at 2-4 (applying two-step analysis established by the United States District Court in *Reader’s Digest Ass’n v. FEC*, 509 F. Supp. 1210, 1215 (S.D.N.Y. 1981)).

A. Media Entity

In the first step of its analysis, the Commission asks whether the entity engaging in the activity is a media entity within the meaning of the Act and Commission regulations.² *See, e.g.*, Advisory Opinion 2016-01 (Ethiq) at 2-3. To determine whether an entity is a media entity, the Commission focuses on “whether the entity in question is in the business of producing on a regular basis a program that disseminates news stories, commentary, and/or editorials.” Advisory Opinion 2008-14 (Melothe) at 4. “Commentary” is interpreted broadly to include not only commentary by the media entity and its staff, but also guest commentary. Advisory Opinion 1982-44 (Democratic National Committee *et al.*) at 3 (“[T]he Commission is of the view that commentary cannot be limited to the broadcaster. The exemption already includes the term ‘editorial’ which applies specifically to the broadcaster’s point of view. In the opinion of the Commission, ‘commentary’ was intended to allow the third persons access to the media to discuss issues.”); Advisory Opinion 1998-17 (Daniels Cablevision) at 5 (30 seconds of free airtime provided to candidates on equal basis was “commentary” for purposes of the media exemption).

In addition, the Commission has not limited the definition of “media entity” to “traditional news outlets.” Advisory Opinion 2008-14 (Melothe) at 3. For example, the

² Neither the Act nor Commission regulations use or define the term “press entity” or “media entity.” Those terms are used interchangeably in Commission opinions. For simplicity, this advisory opinion uses the term “media entity” and “media exemption” throughout except where quoting a source that uses the term “press entity” or “press exemption.”

Commission found that a web company that operated a network of specialized news and information websites with limited original content qualified as a media entity. Advisory Opinion 2000-13 (Ampex *et al.*) at 3; *see also* Advisory Opinion 2008-14 (Melothe) at 4 (company that proposed to launch and operate an internet TV station covering campaigns of one or more federal candidates through news reports, roundtable discussions, coverage of campaign events, and commentary qualified as media entity). Consistent with the Commission's recognition that media activities may be conducted by entities using evolving technologies, the longevity of the media company is not a factor in determining whether an entity qualifies for the media exemption. *See, e.g.*, Advisory Opinion 2008-14 (Melothe) at 2, 4-5 (finding a corporation was a media entity based on its proposal to create a new internet campaign TV station).

Under step one of the media exemption analysis, System73 is a media entity because it operates two online channels that focus on business, finance, and investment news and sporting events, producing original content, featuring live events, and disseminating content acquired from other creators. AOR002. This conclusion is consistent with the broad interpretation of "media entity" and "commentary" in previous advisory opinions.

B. Ownership and Control and Legitimate Media Function

In the second step of the Commission's analysis, the Commission considers whether activity by a qualified media entity is within the scope of the exemption based on whether: a) the media entity is owned or controlled by a political party, political committee, or candidate, and b) the media entity is acting within its legitimate media function in conducting the activity at issue. Advisory Opinion 2016-01 (Ethiq) at 3-4; Advisory Opinion 2007-20 (XM Satellite Radio) at 3-5 (finding satellite radio company featuring news updates, candidate interviews, speeches, debate coverage, polling results, fundraising status, and live call-in shows within the media exemption in providing free airing of candidate-supplied content); Advisory Opinion 2005-16 (Fired Up) at 4, 6 (determining cost of carrying content on website that provided commentary, summaries and editorials of news stories created by others, as well as its own original reporting, within entity's legitimate media function). Two considerations relevant to this analysis are whether the entity's materials are: 1) available to the general public and 2) comparable to those ordinarily issued by the entity. *See, e.g.*, Advisory Opinion 2000-13 (Ampex) at 3 (concluding costs of producing website "viewable by the general public and akin to a periodical or news program" within media entity's legitimate media function).

The Commission has previously determined that a media entity may provide free airtime to candidates within the scope of the media exemption. *See* Advisory Opinion 2007-20 (XM Satellite Radio) at 4 (finding free airing of candidate-supplied content by media entity within entity's media function); Advisory Opinion 1998-17 (Daniels Cablevision) at 1-2, 5 (providing 30 seconds free airtime to candidates on equal basis within media function); Advisory Opinion 1982-44 at 3 (Democratic National Committee *et al.*) (concluding cable company proposal to provide two hours of free time to both major political parties to discuss issues, to attempt to show the differences between the

two parties, and to encourage support of political parties within company's media function).

Here, System73's proposed activities satisfy both elements of this second step of the media exemption analysis: a) System73 is not owned or controlled by a political party, political committee, or candidate, AOR004; and b) System73 would act within the scope of its legitimate media function in streaming a committee's campaign appearances, rallies, debates, and related events without charge to the political committee.

There are three reasons System73's proposal falls within the scope of its legitimate media function. First, System73's proposal to livestream political committee events without charge to the committee is similar to other circumstances in which the Commission has found that providing free airtime to candidates was within a legitimate media function and permissible "guest commentary." *See* Advisory Opinion 2007-20 (XM Satellite Radio) at 4; Advisory Opinion 1998-17 (Daniels Cablevision) at 1-2, 5; Advisory Opinion 1982-44 (Democratic National Committee *et al.*) at 3. Second, System73's streams of political committee events would be available to the public on System73's web channels. *See, e.g.*, Advisory Opinion 2000-13 (Ampex) at 3 (concluding costs of producing website "viewable by the general public and akin to a periodical or news program" within media entity's legitimate media function). Third, System73's proposal to stream political committee events is comparable to its existing streaming of other live events.

Conclusion

The Commission concludes that System73's proposal is permissible because the proposed activity is within the media exemption to the Act's prohibition on corporate contributions. Given that System73's proposal is within the media exemption, the Commission need not consider System73's alternative argument that the proposal is permissible as a *bona fide* commercial activity.

This response constitutes an advisory opinion concerning the application of the Act and Commission regulations to the specific transaction or activity set forth in your request. *See* 52 U.S.C. § 30108. The Commission emphasizes that, if there is a change in any of the facts or assumptions presented, and such facts or assumptions are material to a conclusion presented in this advisory opinion, then the requestor may not rely on that conclusion as support for its proposed activity. Any person involved in any specific transaction or activity which is indistinguishable in all its material aspects from the transaction or activity with respect to which this advisory opinion is rendered may rely on this advisory opinion. *See* 52 U.S.C. § 30108(c)(1)(B). Please note that the analysis or conclusions in this advisory opinion may be affected by subsequent developments in the

law including, but not limited to, statutes, regulations, advisory opinions, and case law. Any advisory opinions cited herein are available on the Commission's website.

On behalf of the Commission,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ellen L. Weintraub" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ellen L. Weintraub
Chair