

NRA LAUNCHES WEB TALK SHOW

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U.S. gun lobby sets sights on media empire: Tired of bad press: NRA launches Web talk show, aims to buy radio station.

WASHINGTON - The National Rifle Association -- long critical of the bad press it gets -- is creating its own news corporation, starting an Internet talk show and preparing to buy a radio station to speak about candidates and gun rights at election time despite new political ad limits.

The four million-member U.S. gun lobby, looking for the same legal recognition as mainstream news organizations, says it has already hired its first reporter. NRANews.com started online broadcasts yesterday.

The NRA is taking the step to operate free of political spending limits, hoping to use unlimited donations known as soft money to focus on gun issues and candidates' positions despite the law's restrictions on soft money-financed political ads close to elections.

"Someone needs to show the court and the politicians how absurd their speech gag on the American public is," said Wayne LaPierre, the association's executive vice president.

"This is an act of defiance. But it's also in 100% compliance with the law."

He said the NRA is taking several steps to become a "legitimate packager of news" like newspapers and TV networks, including hiring Cam Edwards, a conservative talk-show host from Oklahoma City.

Started with a US\$1-million investment, the Internet programming features news briefs in the morning and at noon, followed by a three-hour afternoon "news show/talk show" hosted by Mr. Edwards.

The group is setting up an NRA news corporation, possibly for profit, to run its new media operations. It is close to acquiring a radio station that will stream video of its NRA broadcasts to the Internet, Mr. LaPierre said.

The NRA plans to own a news operation "just as Disney owns ABC, just as GE owns NBC, just as Time Warner AOL owns CNN, and be the broadcast journalist equivalent of those outlets."

"Who's to say they're any more legitimate on packaging news to the American public on firearms and hunting than the National Rifle Association, when in fact we've been in the news business longer than they have in terms of packaging news on those subjects?" he asked.

Mr. LaPierre has a point, one newspaper executive said. It is up to the reader to determine whether information "is credible, reliable and objective," said Stuart Wilk, president of Associated Press Managing Editors and managing editor of the Dallas Morning News.

"I would hope that American consumers would be properly skeptical about the objectivity of a group whose stated purpose is to lobby for a specific position -- in this case about gun control and gun-related legislation and activities."

Larry Noble, head of the Center for Responsive Politics and former lead attorney for the Federal Election Commission (FEC), said if the NRA operation has the trappings of a press entity, such as a radio outlet, it has a strong argument that it is one.

"The law does allow news media to editorialize and do commentary. It's the reason The New York Times can endorse candidates in its editorials," Mr. Noble said.

"So in one sense they are not blazing new ground, but they are going into an area that's still forming and about which regulations are still being developed."

Whether Webcasts alone would make the NRA a press entity is a harder question, he added. Congress and the FEC haven't dealt with the intersection of the Internet and the media, "and the lines are blurring."

The NRA and several other Interest groups sued unsuccessfully to strike down campaign spending limits. The law, upheld in December by the U.S. Supreme Court, bans the use of corporate and labour union money for ads targeting congressional and presidential candidates close to elections. It also bars national party committees and federal candidates from raising soft money.

The law left political activity on the Internet largely unregulated and maintained a long-standing media exemption from political advertising rules for news and entertainment programming.

Mixing news and a political agenda is nothing new, said Gordon McKerral,

national president of the Society of Professional Journalists. When the U.S. press was in its infancy, newspapers were vehicles to promote political agendas.

Now, again, "it's getting awful tough, I think, for people to sort out what's supposed to be objectively reported fact and opinion," he said.

The NRA has a huge potential audience.

In addition to its four million members, there are 16 million licensed hunters and 80 million gun owners in the United States, Mr. LaPierre said.