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IS THE MAINE WEB REPORT NOW THE COLLINS WEB REPORT? By Carl Lindemann

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What's wrong with putting in an extra effort at your own place to help out a new, lucrative client? If your place happens to be a website and the client is a political campaign, it can raise important ethical concerns.

The case in point is how noted Maine "blogger" Lance Dutson has traded his independence to become a paid partisan in the Collins/Allen senate race. Dutson has been regularly presented as a standard-setting example of "citizen journalism". He first gained visibility and credibility with his "Maine Web Report" by successfully drawing attention to issues at the state Office of Tourism. Early this year, he was selected as one of a handful of "bloggers" credentialed to cover the "Scooter" Libby trial. Also, he is a board member of the Media Bloggers Association, a group with a mission of "supporting the development of 'blogging' or 'citizen journalism' as a distinct form of media..."

Unfortunately, visitors to Lance Dutson's Maine Web Report today might easily miss the fact that he has crossed over from providing independent "reports" to being a party to a story that has become the focus of his "reporting." He holds the title of Director of Internet Strategy for the Collins campaign. According to the Federal Elections Commission, Dutson's consulting firm, Maine Coast Design, received a payment of \$25,962 for "website design" on June 25. This was the single largest expenditure reported in the Collins for Senator committee's July 15 quarterly report.

How did this influence Dutson's blogging interests? In June, he made eight postings to his site. Other than announcing his new role on June 1st, he makes no mention of the Senate race. That changed after the campaign's check cleared at the end of the month. Nine of the ten entries in July focused on matters directly related to the campaign.

Of course, Dutson does not surrender his First Amendment rights by joining a political campaign. Still, his site has an established reputation for providing an independent perspective. When he began writing about the Senate campaign in July, the notice that he had become part of the story was already buried in his site's archives. Yes, if you dig around, you might find the information. Is that sufficient? Dutson's fellow Maine blogger and personal friend Jason Clarke is scrupulous about revealing such conflicts of interest. His policy is to "always clearly disclose that type of relationship within the post in question" as well as to provide a link to a disclosure statement. Dutson does not live up to that standard. Here, a full disclaimer should be front-and-center given the fundamental change.

Of greater concern is whether those on a campaign payroll can voice independent opinions about that campaign. Patrick Ruffini, a Republican campaign consultant who directed the Republican National Committee's online "eCampaign" for the 2006 midterm elections says yes. Responding to a blogger connecting Dutson's site and his political patron, he asks "who gets to break the news to him that the Maine Web Report is not part of Susan Collins' campaign?" Unfortunately, this blanket dismissal disregards how other campaigns have brought bloggers into the fold. Once hired, they typically post campaign comments on the candidate's website. There is no mistaking the relationship. They speak for the candidate. What of posts to their own sites? When you join a campaign, your reputation becomes intertwined. That's how it is with anyone closely connected to a political campaign. A concern for reputation – both his and the Collins campaign's - may be what is behind a recent change in Dutson's site's editorial policy. On August 16th he announced, "I'll be limiting who can comment here based on my familiarity with them personally or through previous comments they've left."

Can the Director of Internet Strategy for the Collins' campaign honestly claim that his commentary on the Collins/Allen race is "independent" of the Collins reelection effort? If he makes vile or vicious comments about Allen and his allies, shouldn't his patron be concerned? What about when he engages in name-calling, as he did recently referring to one blog with a national reputation as a "hate-site" or another as a "foul-mouthed fem-blog"? Does this reflect the "moderate" values that Collins seeks to promote, or does it stoke the flames of partisan polarization she claims to oppose?

To suggest that campaign operatives can break ranks with the official stance without it reflecting on the candidate is an invitation to abuse. It opens the door to smear campaigns where staffers are free to assail and insult opponents. If anyone takes issue with this conduct, the candidate can deny responsibility. It encourages candidates to amp up the dirty tactics - just offload them to "personal" websites where there is no accountability.

Dutson is a political novice and an amateur reporter. Perhaps he does not understand what it means for him to cross over from "citizen journalist" to campaign operative. Senator Collins knows better and needs to take responsibility here.

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ABOUT:

Carl Lindemann is the founder of TrueDialog.org, a civic organization whose mission is "to encourage and empower citizens to demand authenticity in public life."