'Yes on Prop. 87' Group Sued Over Cyber No-No

Supporters of a proposed tax on oil production are accused of setting up deceptive websites.

By Marc Lifsher, Times Staff Writer
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For many Web surfers this week, a simple search request led to a crude awakening. Anyone looking for information on Proposition 87, a proposed tax on oil produced in California, and going to the "No on 87" website was instead redirected to "Yes on 87." At least for a while.

In the high-tech, high-stakes world of cyberpolitics, it seems that supporters of Proposition 87 registered several "no" sites and then redirected viewers to "yes."

The tactic infuriated oil companies and business groups that are spending millions of dollars to fight the proposed tax, which would pay for research on alternative fuels.

On Tuesday, the No on 87 campaign sued the Yes on 87 campaign, accusing it of illegally buying up potential "no" Web addresses such as http://www.noon87.com.

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The suit filed in Alameda County Superior Court alleges that the "yes" campaign, bankrolled by Hollywood producer Steven Bing and Silicon Valley venture capitalists, broke a little-known state law, the California Political Cyberfraud Abatement Act.

The law, enacted in 2001, "makes it unlawful for a person, with intent to mislead, deceive or defraud, to commit an act of political cyberfraud."

James R. Parrinello, the "no" campaign's attorney, said his case was clear-cut. "We think there's no doubt they are doing something illegal," he said.

The "yes" campaign confirmed later Tuesday that it set up the Web switch as a way to promote Proposition 87.

In a letter to the "no" campaign, the "yes" camp offered to turn over control of its "no" websites — with a hitch. It wants the opponents to more directly tell voters that "No on 87" is financed by oil companies, which have reported making more than $30 million in contributions.

Parrinello called the letter "an admission of guilt." He said he expected to be in court Thursday to ask for an injunction to stop the "yes" campaign from using the website.

Meanwhile, the noon87.com website changed again, and not in a way that its hosts liked.

A visit there late Tuesday afternoon revealed a new message, "Warning: The site you are about to enter is written and paid for by the oil companies." Visitors were then redirected to www.nooiltax.com.
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