

Opinion: Legislation could protect online reviewers

By Christopher Elliott, Washington Post

If you've never heard of a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP), consider yourself lucky.

I hadn't either until a knock at my door on a January evening seven years ago. A process server pushed an envelope into my hand. "You are being sued," a notice at the top of the document proclaimed. I felt my pulse quicken.

SLAPP lawsuits – which most often take the form of a defamation suit – are surprisingly common. They are meant to burden individuals with the cost of a legal defense until they stop their criticism. They affect travelers disproportionately, in large part because travelers' opinions have the power to raise the fortunes of a hotel or restaurant – or to put them out of business.

Last year, for example, roughly 2,500 TripAdvisor users removed their reviews because they were being harassed by businesses they had rated, according to the site. It's not known how many disrupted reviews resulted in lawsuits.

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