

**THE TEXAS ANTI-SLAPP LAW:
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE CH. 27**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	i
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES	iv
I. INTRODUCTION.	1
II. THE TEXAS CITIZENS PARTICIPATION ACT: WHAT IS IT?	2
A. Background and Enactment of the TCPA.....	2
1. What is a SLAPP lawsuit?	2
2. Stated Purpose: Prevent Frivolous Suits.....	3
3. A Solution in Search of a Problem: Underlying Purpose is the Protection of Media Defendants	4
4. The 2013 Amendments: Still Media-Driven.	7
III. APPLICATION OF THE TCPA.	9
A. What claims are covered?	9
B. Exceptions to the TCPA.....	13
C. Procedure.	15
1. A New Form of Dispositive Motion.	15
2. Deadline to File the Motion.	16
3. Deadline for Hearing and Decision: "Set," "Rule," and Continuances.....	16
4. Discovery Stay - for "Good Cause"	18
D. Standards and Burdens of Proof/Actions by Court.....	19
1. What evidence may be considered?	19
2. Burden of Proof on the Movant.	20
3. Burden of Proof on the Respondent.....	20
i. "Clear and specific evidence" is still poorly defined in Texas civil litigation burden of proof.	21

ii.	If "clear and specific evidence" is meant to be a higher standard of proof than "preponderance of the evidence," it could violate the Open Courts provision of the Texas Constitution.....	22
iii.	What is a "prima facie case?"	24
iv.	What about non-communication claims joined in the same lawsuit?	26
4.	Affirmative Defenses Are Now Considered	27
5.	Ruling by the Court - Dismissal Mandatory	28
6.	Request for Ch. 27 Sanctions May Survive Nonsuit.....	28
E.	Mandatory, Not Discretionary, Award of Fees and Sanctions for Movant Upon Dismissal of Legal Action.	29
F.	Award of Fees, Not Sanctions, for Respondent/Plaintiff – Predicated on Frivolous Motion.....	31
G.	Appellate Review.....	31
1.	Interlocutory Appeal: What is Reviewable?.....	31
i.	Denial of motion to dismiss by operation of law: interlocutory appeal is clearly available	32
ii.	Timely written denial of motion to dismiss - an interlocutory appeal is available for any order that "denies a motion to dismiss" filed under Section 27.003	32
a.	Cases finding no jurisdiction to hear interlocutory appeal from untimely written order denying motion to dismiss.	33
b.	Cases finding there is jurisdiction to hear interlocutory appeal from untimely written order denying motion to dismiss	34
iii.	Mandamus.....	35
2.	Motion to Dismiss Timely Granted	36
i.	May be appealable noninterlocutory order	36

ii.	May be appealable interlocutory order	37
3.	Deadlines for Chapter 27 Appeal or Writ	38
4.	Any Appeal or Writ From An Order On A Chapter 27 Motion to Dismiss Shall be Expedited.....	39
5.	Standard of Review of Interlocutory Appeal.....	39
i.	De novo review - statutory construction.....	39
ii.	Legal sufficiency review.....	40
iii.	Factual sufficiency review	41
H.	Does the TCPA Apply in Federal Court?	41
I.	Does the Act Conflict with the Supreme Court’s Rule-Making Authority?	44
J.	Does the Statute Conflict With Texas’ Constitutional Protection of Rights to Sue for Reputational Torts?.....	45
IV.	UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES.....	46
A.	Overbroad Application and Chilling Effect on Meritorious Business Tort Actions.....	46
B.	Justice Delayed is Justice Denied.....	48
C.	When The Texas Attorney General Must Be Invited to the Party.....	48
V.	THE TCPA - CONCLUSIONS DRAWN.....	49
VI.	THE “MULLIGAN BILL”: THE TEXAS DEFAMATION MITIGATION ACT.....	49
A.	Legislative History.....	49
B.	Application of the Defamation Mitigation Act: Prerequisites To Filing Defamation Suit, Request and Response, Abatement.....	52
C.	Limitations of Damages.....	53
D.	Harmonizing (or Conflicting) With Texas Citizens Participation Act.....	53

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	Page(s)
Cases	
<i>3M Co. v. Boulter</i> , 290 F.R.D. 5 (D. D.C. 2013) (<i>Boulter II</i>)	42, 43
<i>3M Co. v. Boulter</i> , 842 F. Supp. 2d 85 (D. D.C. 2012)	42
<i>ACS Investors, Inc. v. McLaughlin</i> , 943 S.W.2d 426 (Tex. 1997).....	26
<i>Addison v. Holly Hill Fruit Prods., Inc.</i> , 322 U.S. 607, 88 L.Ed. 1488, 64 S.Ct. 1215 (1944).....	40
<i>Alex Sheshunoff Mgmt. Servs., L.P. v. Johnson</i> , 209 S.W.3d 644 (Tex. 2006).....	40
<i>Alphonso v. Deshotel</i> , 417 S.W.3d 194 (Tex. App. – El Paso 2013, no pet.).....	30
<i>Am. Heritage Capital, LP v. Gonzalez</i> , No. 05-12-00892-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 7124 (Tex. App. Dallas July 1, 2014, no pet. h.)	36
<i>Aquaplex, Inc. v. Rancho La Valencia, Inc.</i> , 297 S.W.3d 768 (Tex. 2009).....	25
<i>Ascend Health Corp. v. Wells</i> , 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 35237 (E. D. N.C. March 14, 2013)	43
<i>Avila and Univision v. Larrea</i> , 394 S.W.3d 646 (Tex. App. – Dallas 2012, pet. filed)	<i>passim</i>
<i>Barbara Soules Young and Amy Ganci v. Krantz</i> , No. 05-13-00853-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 5703 (Tex. App. – Dallas [5th Dist.], May 28, 2014, no pet.).....	12
<i>Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly</i> , 550 U.S. 544, 127 S.Ct. 1955, 167 L.Ed.2d 929 (2007).....	43

<i>Better Bus. Bureau of Metro. Dallas, Inc. v. BH DFW, Inc.</i> , 402 S.W.3d 299 (Tex. App. – Dallas 2013, pet. denied).....	14, 35
<i>Better Bus. Bureau of Metro. Dallas, Inc. v. Ward.</i> , 401 S.W.3d 440 (Tex. App. – Dallas 2013, pet. denied).....	14
<i>Better Bus. Bureau of Metro. Houston, Inc. v. John Moore Services</i> , No. 01-12-00990-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 8756 (Tex. App. – Houston [1st Dist.] July 16, 2013, no pet. h.).....	<i>passim</i>
<i>Brady v. Fourteenth Court of Appeals</i> , 795 S.W.2d 712 (Tex. 1990).....	35, 37
<i>Brandenburg v. Ohio</i> , 395 U.S. 444 (1969).....	11
<i>Carr v. Brasher</i> , 776 S.W.2d 567 (Tex. 1989).....	25
<i>Casso v. Brand</i> , 776 S.W.2d 551 (Tex. 1989).....	45, 46
<i>Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire</i> , 315 U.S. 568 (1942).....	11
<i>Estate of Check</i> , No. 04-13-00388-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 7331 (Tex. App. – San Antonio [4th Dist.], Jul. 9, 2014, no pet.).....	16
<i>Cheniere Energy, Inc. v. Lofti</i> , No. 01-13-00515-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 6197 (Tex. App. – Houston [1st Dist.] June 10, 2014, no pet. h.).....	13
<i>City of Austin v. Whittington</i> , 384 S.W.3d 766 (Tex. 2012).....	32
<i>City of Keller v. Wilson</i> , 168 S.W.3d 802 (Tex. 2005).....	37, 40, 41
<i>CMH Homes v. Perez</i> , 340 S.W.3d 444 (Tex. 2011).....	33, 34
<i>Coinmach Corp. v. Aspenwood Apartment Corp.</i> , 417 S.W. 3d 909 (Tex. 2013).....	26
<i>Columbia Med. Ctr. of Las Colinas, Inc. v. Hogue</i> , 271 S.W.3d 238 (Tex. 2008).....	40

<i>Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas. v. Sheffield</i> , No. 03-13-00105-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 1098 (Tex. App. – Austin Jan. 31, 2014, pet. filed).....	<i>passim</i>
<i>Cook v. Tom Brown Ministries, et al.</i> , 385 S.W.3d 592 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2012, pet. denied)	1, 35
<i>Coward v. Gateway Nat’l Bank</i> , 525 S.W.2d 857 (Tex. 1975).....	24
<i>Crawford-El v. Britton</i> , 523 U.S. 574, 118 S.Ct. 1584, 140 L.Ed.2d 759 (1998).....	43
<i>Croucher v. Croucher</i> , 660 S.W.2d 55 (Tex. 1983).....	41
<i>CTL/Thompson Texas, LLC v. Starwood Homeowner’s Ass’n</i> , 390 S.W.3d 299 (Tex. 2013).....	29
<i>Culbertson v. Lykos</i> , 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 129538 (S.D. Tex. Sept. 11, 2013)	43
<i>In re D.C.</i> , No. 05-13-00944-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 10006 (Tex. App. – Dallas Aug. 9, 2013)(mem. op.).....	19
<i>Direct Commercial Funding, Inc. v. Beacon Hill Estates</i> , No. 14-12-00896-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 1898 (Tex. App. – Houston [14th Dist.] January 24, 2013, no pet. h.)	3, 34, 37
<i>Dodson v. Bunton</i> , 81 Tex. 655, 17 S.W. 507 (Tex. 1891)	40
<i>In re Doe</i> , 19 S.W.3d 249 (Tex. 2000).....	39
<i>In re E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co.</i> , 136 S.W.3d 218 (Tex. 2004)(orig. proceeding).....	24
<i>Entergy Gulf States, Inc. v. Summers</i> , 282 S.W.3d 433 (Tex. 2009).....	39, 40
<i>Epps v. Fowler</i> , 351 S.W.3d 862 (Tex. 2011).....	29
<i>Fitzgerald v. Advanced Spine Fixation Systems</i> , 996 S.W.2d 864 (Tex. 1999).....	40

<i>Fitzmaurice v. Jones</i> , 417 S.W. 3d 627.....	24
<i>Fleming Foods of Tex. v. Rylander</i> , 6 S.W.3d 278 (Tex. 1999).....	40
<i>Forbes, Inc. v. Granada Biosciences, Inc.</i> , 124 S.W.3d 167 (Tex. 2003).....	24, 25
<i>Ford Motor Co. v. Ridgeway</i> , 135 S.W.3d 598 (Tex. 2004).....	24
<i>Formosa Plastics Corp. USA v. Presidio Eng'rs & Contractors Inc.</i> , 960 S.W.2d 41 (Tex. 1998).....	25
<i>Godin v. Schencks</i> , 629 F.3d 79 (1st Cir. 2010).....	42
<i>Golden Eagle Archery, Inc. v. Jackson</i> , 113 S.W.3d 757 (Tex. 2003).....	41
<i>Goodman v. Ill. Dep't of Fin. & Prof'l Reg.</i> , 430 F.3d 432 (7th Cir. 2005)	11
<i>Henson v. Denison</i> , 546 S.W.2d 898 (Tex. Civ. App. – Fort Worth 1977, no writ).....	25
<i>Herrera v. Stahl</i> , No. 04-14-00018-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 7683 (Tex. Civ. App. – San Antonio July 16, 2014, no pet. h.).....	24
<i>Hinojosa v. Columbia/St. David's Healthcare System, L.P.</i> , 106 S.W.3d 380 (Tex. App.—Austin 2003, no pet.)	24
<i>In re Hinterlong</i> , 109 S.W.3d 611 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2003, orig. proceeding).....	22
<i>Ilff v. Ilff</i> , 339 S.W.3d 74 (Tex. 2011).....	35
<i>Jain v. Cambridge Petroleum Group, Inc.</i> , 395 S.W. 3d 394 (Tex. App. – Dallas 2013, no pet. h.).....	3, 38
<i>James v. Calkins</i> , No. 01-13-00118-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 9321 (Tex. App. – Houston [1st Dist.] August 21, 2014, no pet. h.).....	<i>passim</i>

<i>Jardin v. Marklund et al.</i> , No. 14-13-00616-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 4862 (Tex. App. – Houston [14th Dist.], May 6, 2014, no pet. h.).....	15, 16
<i>Jennings v. Wallbuilder Presentations, Inc.</i> , 378 S.W.3d 519 (Tex. App. – Fort Worth 2012, pet. denied)	<i>passim</i>
<i>KBMT Op. Co. v. Toledo</i> , No. 09-13-00234-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 4956 (Tex. App. – Beaumont [9th Dist.], May 8, 2014 pet. filed)	6, 25
<i>King Ranch, Inc. v. Chapman</i> , 118 S.W.3d 742 (Tex. 2003).....	39
<i>Kinney v. BCG Attorney Search</i> , No. 03-12-00579-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 10481 (Tex. App. – Austin August 21, 2013, pet. filed)	<i>passim</i>
<i>Kool Smiles v. Mauze & Bagby, P.L.L.C.</i> , 2014 U.S. App. LEXIS 4511 (5th Cir. May 8, 2014).....	12, 15, 38, 43
<i>KTRK Television, Inc. v. Robinson</i> , 409 S.W.3d 682 (Tex. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] 2013, pet. denied)	21, 35
<i>In re Lipsky</i> , 411 S.W.3d 530 (Tex. App. – Fort Worth 2013)(orig. proceeding)	<i>passim</i>
<i>Lipsky v. Range Production Co., et al.</i> , No. 02-12-00098-CV, 2012 Tex. App. LEXIS 7059 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth Aug. 23, 2012, pet. denied)(mem. op.)	33
<i>Low v. Henry</i> , 221 S.W.3d 609 (Tex. 2007).....	31
<i>Martinez v. Humble Sand & Gravel, Inc.</i> , 875 S.W.2d 311 (Tex. 1994).....	36
<i>In re McAllen Med. Ctr., Inc.</i> , 275 S.W.3d 458 (Tex. 2008)(orig. proceeding).....	36
<i>McDonald v. Clemens</i> , 464 S.W.2d 450 (Tex. Civ. App.—Tyler 1971, no writ)	22
<i>Milkovich v. Lorain Journal Co.</i> , 497 U.S. 1 (1990).....	25, 45
<i>N.Y. Underwriters Ins. Co. v. Sanchez</i> , 799 S.W.2d 677 (Tex. 1990).....	33

<i>National Surety Corp. v. Ladd</i> , 131 Tex. 295, 115 S.W.2d 600 (Tex. 1938)	39
<i>Neely v. Wilson</i> , 2013 Tex. LEXIS 511, 56 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 766 (June 28, 2013)	45, 46, 49
<i>Newspaper Holdings, Inc. v. Crazy Hotel Assisted Living, Ltd.</i> , 416 S.W.3d 71 (Tex. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] 2013, pet. denied)	<i>passim</i>
<i>In re Office of the Attorney General</i> , 422 S.W.3d 623 (Tex. 2013).....	40
<i>Osborne v. Ohio</i> , 495 U.S. 103 (1990).....	11
<i>Ostrovitz & Gwinn, LLC v. First Specialty Ins. Co.</i> , 393 S.W.3d 379 (Tex. App. – Dallas 2012, no pet.).....	26
<i>P&G v. Amway Corp.</i> , 242 F.3d 539 (5th Cir. 2001)	11
<i>Parker v. Walton</i> , 233 S.W.3d 535 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2007, no pet.).....	4
<i>Pena v. Perel</i> , 417 S.W. 3d 552 (Tex. App. El Paso 2013, no pet.).....	15
<i>Pickens v. Cordia</i> , No. 05-13-00780-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 5589 (Tex. App. – Dallas, May 22, 2014, no pet.)	12
<i>Pool v. Ford Motor Co.</i> , 715 S.W.2d 629 (Tex. 1986)(op. on reh’g).....	41
<i>Public Utility Comm’n of Texas v. Cofer</i> , 754 S.W.2d 121 (Tex. 1988).....	39
<i>Quick v. City of Austin</i> , 7 S.W.3d 109 (Tex. 1998).....	39
<i>Railroad Comm’n of Tex. v. Tex. Citizens for a Safe Future and Clean Water</i> , 336 S.W.3d 619 (Tex. 2011).....	39
<i>Ramsey v. Lynch</i> , No. 10-12-00198-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 5554 (Tex. App. – Waco May 2, 2013, no pet.)(mem. op.).....	<i>passim</i>

<i>Rehak Creative Servs. v. Witt</i> , No. 14-12-00658-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 6196 (Tex. App. – Houston [14th Dist.] May 21, 2013, pet. denied).....	22
<i>Richardson-Eagle, Inc. v. Mercer, Inc.</i> , 213 S.W.3d 469 (Tex. App. – Houston [1st Dist.] 2006, pet. denied).....	26
<i>Rio Grande H2O Guardian v. Robert Muller Family P'ship</i> , No. 04-13-00441-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 915 (Tex. App. - San Antonio, Jan. 29, 2014, no pet. h.).....	12, 22
<i>Rivers v. Johnson Custodial Home, Inc.</i> , No. A-14-CA-484-SS, 2014 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 117759 (W.D. Tex. – August 22, 2014).....	11, 12, 43
<i>Rodriguez v. Printone Color Corp.</i> , 982 S.W.2d 69 (Tex. App. – Houston [1st Dist.] 1998, pet. denied).....	24
<i>Roth v. United States</i> , 354 U.S. 476 (1957).....	11
<i>San Jacinto Title Services v. Kingsley Properties, LP</i> , No. 13-12-003520CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 5081 (Tex. App. – Corpus Christi – Edinburg April 25, 2013, no pet. h.).....	<i>passim</i>
<i>Sax v. Votteler</i> , 648 S.W.2d 661 (Tex. 1983).....	22
<i>Schimmel v. McGregor</i> , No. 01-13-00721-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 7530 (Tex. App. - Houston [1st Dist.] July 10, 2014, no pet. h.).....	<i>passim</i>
<i>Service Corp. v. Guerra</i> , 348 S.W.3d 221 (Tex. 2011).....	41
<i>Shady Grove Orthopedic Assocs. v. Allstate Ins. Co.</i> , 559 U.S. 393, 130 S.Ct. 1431, 1437, 176 L.Ed.2d 311(2010).....	42
<i>Shipp v. Malouf</i> , No. 05-13-01080-CV, 2014 Tex. App. LEXIS 6805 (Tex. App. – Dallas [5th Dist.], Jun. 24, 2014, no pet.).....	6
<i>Smith v. Smith</i> , 126 S.W.3d 660 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2004, no pet.).....	22
<i>Sorokolit v. Rhodes</i> , 889 S.W.2d 239 (Tex. 1994).....	40

<i>Stary v. DeBord</i> , 967 S.W.2d 352 (Tex. 1998).....	33
<i>Stockton v. Offenbach</i> , 336 S.W.3d 610 (Tex. 2011).....	40
<i>Summersett v. Jaiyeola</i> , No. 13-12-004442-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 8882 (Tex. App. – Corpus Christi-Edinburg, July 18, 2013, pet. denied).....	31
<i>In re Team Rocket, L.P.</i> , 256 S.W.3d 257 (Tex. 2008)(orig. proceeding).....	36
<i>Tex. Dep’t of Parks & Wildlife v. Miranda</i> , 133 S.W.3d 217 (Tex. 2004).....	41
<i>Tex. Tech Univ. Health Science Ctr. v. Apodaca</i> , 876 S.W.2d 402 (Tex. App. – El Paso 1994, writ denied).....	24
<i>Texas Mun. Power Agency v. Public Util. Comm’n</i> , 253 S.W.3d 184 (Tex. 1997).....	39
<i>In re Thuesen</i> , No. 14-13-00255-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 4636 (Tex. App. – Houston [14th Dist.] April 11, 2013)(orig. proceeding)(mem. op.).....	<i>passim</i>
<i>Trinity River Auth. v. URS Consultants, Inc.</i> , 889 S.W.2d 259 (Tex. 1994).....	22
<i>Ex parte Tucci</i> , 859 S.W.2d 1 (Tex. 1993) (Phillips, C.J., concurring)	45
<i>Turner v. KTRK Television, Inc.</i> , 38 S.W.3d 103 (Tex. 2000).....	25, 45, 46
<i>In re United Scaffolding, Inc.</i> , 301 S.W.3d 661 (Tex. 2010)(orig. proceeding).....	35
<i>United States v. Lockheed Missiles & Space Co.</i> , 190 F.3d 963 (9th Cir. 1999)	42
<i>UTMB v. Estate of Blackmon</i> , 195 S.W.3d 98 (Tex. 2006).....	29
<i>Villafani v. Trejo</i> , 251 S.W.3d 466 (Tex. 2008).....	29

<i>Vincenty v. Bloomberg</i> , 476 F.3d 74 (2nd Cir. 2007).....	11
<i>Walker v. Packer</i> , 827 S.W.2d 833 (Tex. 1991).....	35
<i>WFAA-TV Inc. v. McLemore</i> , 978 S.W.2d 568 (Tex. 1998).....	25
<i>Whisenhunt v. Lippincott</i> , 416 S.W. 3d 689 (Tex. App. – Texarkana 2013, pet. filed).....	11, 12
<i>Wholesale TV and Radio Advertising, LLC v. Better Bus. Bureau of Metro. Dallas, Inc.</i> , No. 05-11-01337-CV, 2013 Tex. App. LEXIS 7348 (Tex. App. – Dallas June 14, 2013, no pet.)	14, 25
<i>Williams v. Cordillera Communications, Inc.</i> , 2014 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 79584 (S.D. Tex. June 11, 2014)	43
Rules and Statutes	
D.C. CODE §§ 16-5501-5505	41
FED. R. APP. P. 4.....	43
FED. R. CIV. P. 1	42, 44
FED. R. CIV. P. 6(b)	17
FED. R. CIV. P. 8	43
FED. R. CIV. P. 9	43
FED. R. CIV. P. 12	15, 41, 43
FED. R. CIV. P. 12(b)	17
FED. R. CIV. P. 12(d)	43
FED. R. CIV. P. 56	41, 44
HAW. REV. STAT. § 634F-1 (2011)	2
LOCAL RULE CV-7(d), U.S. DIST. CT. W.D. OF TEX.....	17
TEX. BUS. & COM. CODE §17.01, <i>et seq.</i>	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 9.001, <i>et seq.</i>	4

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 9.002(a)(2).....	5
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 9.003	44
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 10.001, <i>et seq.</i>	4
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 10.001	5, 30
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE §10.002(a)	5
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 10.002(b)	5
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 10.004.....	5
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 10.005	30
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 10.006	5
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 22.021, <i>et seq.</i>	5
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 22.024.....	21
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001, <i>et seq.</i>	1, 45
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(1)	10
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(2)	13
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(3)	10
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(4)	12
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(4)(a)(ii).....	10
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(6)	10, 26
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001(7)	12
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.002.....	3
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.003	1, 32
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.003(a)	9, 15, 16
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.003(b)	16
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.003(c).....	18, 26
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.004	9, 17, 18

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.004(a)	16
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.004(b)	9, 17
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.004(c)	9, 16, 17, 18
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.005	1, 18, 36, 37
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.005(a)	18
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.005(b)	20, 25, 26
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.005(c)	21, 23, 27
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.005(d)	9, 27
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.006	17
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.006(a)	19
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.006(b)	18
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.007	28, 29
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.007(a)	28
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.007(b)	28
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.008	<i>passim</i>
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.008(a)	32, 33, 38
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.008(b)	<i>passim</i>
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.008(c)	9, 34, 38
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.009	30
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.009(a)	29
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.009(a)(1)	20
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.009(b)	31
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.010	9
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.010(a)	13
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.010(b)	14

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.010(c)	13
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.010(d)	14
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.011(b)	18, 35, 37
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 37.006	49
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 41.001(2)	21
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 41.003	31
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 51.014	8, 32, 33, 39
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 51.014(6)	7
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 51.014(a)(12)	8, 32
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 51.014(a)(6)	32
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 51.014(b)	32
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73	8
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73, SUBCHAPTER B	49
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.001 <i>et seq.</i>	7
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.003(a)(3)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.052	50
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.053	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.055(a)	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.055(b)	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.055(c)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.055(d)	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.056(a)	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.056(b)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.057(a)	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.057(b)	52

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.057(c)	52
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.057(d)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.057(e)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.058(a)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.058(b)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.058(d)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.059	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.061(a)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.061(b)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.062	53, 54
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.062(a)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.062(b)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.062(c)	53
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 73.062(d)	53, 54
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE CHAPTER 22	46
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE CHAPTER 22, SUBCHAPTER C	21
TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE CHAPTER 150	29
TEX. CONST. art. I, § 8	7, 45
TEX. CONST. art. I, § 13	22, 45, 46
TEX. CONST. art. V, § 6	33
TEX. CONST. art. V, § 31(b)	44
TEX. CONST. art. V, § 31(c)	44
TEX. ELEC. CODE § 253.131(a)	47
TEX. ELEC. CODE § 273.081	47
TEX. GOV'T CODE § 22.001(a)(2)	35

TEX. GOV'T CODE § 22.002.....	38
TEX. GOV'T CODE § 22.004(c)	44
TEX. GOV'T. CODE § 22.221	38
TEX. GOV'T CODE § 311.016.....	30
TEX. GOV'T CODE § 311.022.....	32
TEX. GOV'T CODE § 311.023.....	46
TEX. GOV'T CODE § 402.010	48, 49
TEX. R. APP. P. 25.1	38
TEX. R. APP. P. 26	38
TEX. R. APP. P. 26.1	38
TEX. R. APP. P. 52	38
TEX. R. CIV. P. 1	44
TEX. R. CIV. P. 13.....	4, 5, 28, 30
TEX. R. CIV. P. 162.....	29
TEX. R. CIV. P. 166-a.....	17, 44
TEX. R. CIV. P. 166a.....	44
TEX. R. CIV. P. 166a(c).....	17
TEX. R. CIV. P. 166a(i)	24
TEX. R. CIV. P. 174(a)	27
TEX. R. CIV. P. 174(b).....	27
TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.3(a)	19
TEX. R. CIV. P. 196.2.....	18
TEX. R. CIV. P. 199.2(5)	18
TEX. R. CIV. P. 2.....	44
TEX. R. CIV. P. 21.....	17

TEX. R. CIV. P. 41	27
TEX. R. CIV. P. 48	19
TEX. R. CIV. P. 51	26
TEX. R. CIV. P. 97	27
TEX. R. CIV. P. 215	31
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http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlodocs/83R/senateamendana/pdf/HB01759A.pdf#navpanes=0	52
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http://www.foift.org/?page_id=1923	5
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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, OTHELLO, act 3 sc. 3	45

I. INTRODUCTION.

On June 17, 2011, Texas Governor Rick Perry affixed his neat signature to Texas' new anti-SLAPP¹ law, entitled the Texas Citizens Participation Act (the "TCPA"), and in so doing Texas joined 28 states and the District of Columbia in enacting various forms of legislation purportedly aimed at preventing frivolous lawsuits from stifling free speech activities and the rights of petition and association.² As drafted, however, the TCPA has been triggering significant unintended consequences, especially for persons and entities who file suit to protect their reputation and various property interests. The TCPA introduces what one judge called a "draconian" motion to dismiss that places a heavy burden on the aggrieved plaintiff to prove that its suit is not frivolous at the inception of the litigation without the benefit of any meaningful discovery.³ The Act does not define the shape or parameters of a

SLAPP suit or distinguish between causes of action subject to or protected from the anti-SLAPP statute. In fact, few of the cases currently making their way through the appellate courts could properly be characterized as a SLAPP case. So long as a defendant in a reputational torts suit can characterize the suit as "based on," "relating to," or "in response to" the exercise of free speech, petition or association, the motion to dismiss can be filed, and unless the plaintiff presents prima facie evidence of each element of his claim, the motion to dismiss must be granted.⁴

The potential for extension of this recently crafted dispositive motion far beyond the prevention of SLAPP suits is significant. Here are two hypothetical examples:

Example 1: Disgruntled Vocal Car Buyer: Car Dealer sells a new car to a customer who is dissatisfied, and takes her dissatisfaction to the internet and consumer protection agencies. Buyer expresses views that accuse the dealership not only of misrepresentations about worthiness of the vehicle, but that the dealer engages in fraud, illegal kickback schemes, and violations of state and federal advertising laws, some of which carry criminal penalties, and organizes a boycott. Customer sues Car Dealer under the DTPA. Dealer counterclaims for tortious interference and business disparagement, and seeks injunctive relief. How does the TCPA apply?

Example 2: Medical Group Divorce: When Doctor A leaves the practice over the weekend, he takes lists of all patients of the clinic, not just his own, along with all medical files A-K, prior to obtaining any patient consents. Over the

¹ "Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation."

² See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.001, *et seq.* (2011). The 28 other states, in addition to the District of Columbia, are Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and Washington.

³ In a campaign finance law case, the Mayor of El Paso filed suit to enjoin violations of the Texas Elections Code by several corporations and a group of individuals. The defendants filed a motion to dismiss under the lawsuit under the new anti-SLAPP statute, arguing that the corporate contributions at issue in the case were a form of "protected speech." In denying the motion to dismiss, Judge Javier Alvarez stated that the new procedure for dismissal of a lawsuit without discovery and with the burden on the plaintiff was too draconian. The authors of this paper were counsel for the plaintiff in that case. See *Cook v. Tom Brown Ministries, et al.*, 385 S.W.3d 592 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2012, pet. denied) (related interlocutory appeal of temporary injunction).

⁴TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 27.003 & 27.005.

weekend Doctor A calls a number of patients and informs them that Doctors B and C are currently under investigation by the Texas Medical Board and are about to lose their licenses because of “rampant allegations” of improper contact with female patients, and urges the patients to leave the clinic to become his patients, and call all their friends and tell them the same thing. When Doctors B and C find out, they file suit against Dr. A seeking injunctive relief for the return of patient files and protected health information, to prevent Dr. A from continuing his communications, and for damages for defamation, business disparagement, and tortious interference. How does the TCPA apply?

II. THE TEXAS CITIZENS PARTICIPATION ACT: WHAT IS IT?

A. Background and Enactment of the TCPA.

1. What is a SLAPP lawsuit?

The general consensus view among commentators is that SLAPP suits are “legally meritless suits designed, from their inception, to intimidate and harass political critics into silence.”⁵ Hawaii defines a SLAPP suit as “a lawsuit that lacks substantial justification or is interposed for delay or harassment and that is solely based on the party’s public participation before a governmental body.”⁶ According to some views, the typical SLAPP plaintiff “does not seek victory on the merits, but rather victory

by attrition.”⁷ The “object is to quell opposition by fear of large recoveries and legal costs, by diverting energy and resources from opposing the project into defending the lawsuit, and by transforming the debate from a political one to a judicial one, with a corresponding shift of issues from the targets’ grievances to the filers’ grievances.”⁸ The goal of a SLAPP suit is to “stop citizens from exercising their political rights or to punish them for having done so.”⁹ None of the reported Texas decisions to date defines the scope of a SLAPP suit.

By definition, in the “typical” SLAPP case the motivation of the plaintiff is not to achieve a legal victory resulting in a judgment, but instead to make it prohibitively expensive and burdensome for the defendant to continue participation in her constitutionally protected activity. In other words, improper motive is an essential element of a SLAPP lawsuit. The concept assumes that the SLAPP plaintiff enjoys a great advantage in resources to fund litigation, and can afford to overwhelm the defendant with lawsuit expenses and fees. As one commentator explained, “[t]he typical SLAPP suit is brought by a well-heeled ‘Goliath’ against a ‘David’ with fewer resources, trying to keep David from opposing, for example, Goliath’s development plans or other goal.”¹⁰ The

⁵ Mark J. Sobczak, Symposium: *The Modern American Jury: Comment: Slapped in Illinois: The Scope and Applicability of the Illinois Citizen Participation Act*, 28 N. Ill. U. L. Rev. 559, 560-61 (2008), quoting Edmond Costantini & Mary Paul Nash, *SLAPP/SLAPP back: The Misuse of Libel Law for Political Purposes and Countersuit Response*, 7 J.L. & POL 417, 423 (1991).

⁶ HAW. REV. STAT. § 634F-1 (2011).

⁷ Sobczak, *supra*, at 561.

⁸ *Id.*, quoting Jerome I. Braun, *Increasing SLAPP Protection: Unburdening the Right of Petition in California*, 32 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 965, 969-70 (1999).

⁹ *Id.*, citing George W. Pring, *SLAPP: Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation*, 7 PACE ENV’L L. REV. 3, 5-6 (1998).

¹⁰ Richard J. Yurko and Shannon C. Choy, *Legal Analysis: Reconciling the anti-SLAPP Statute With Abuse of Process and Other Litigation-Based Torts*, 51 B.B.J. 15, 15 (2007).