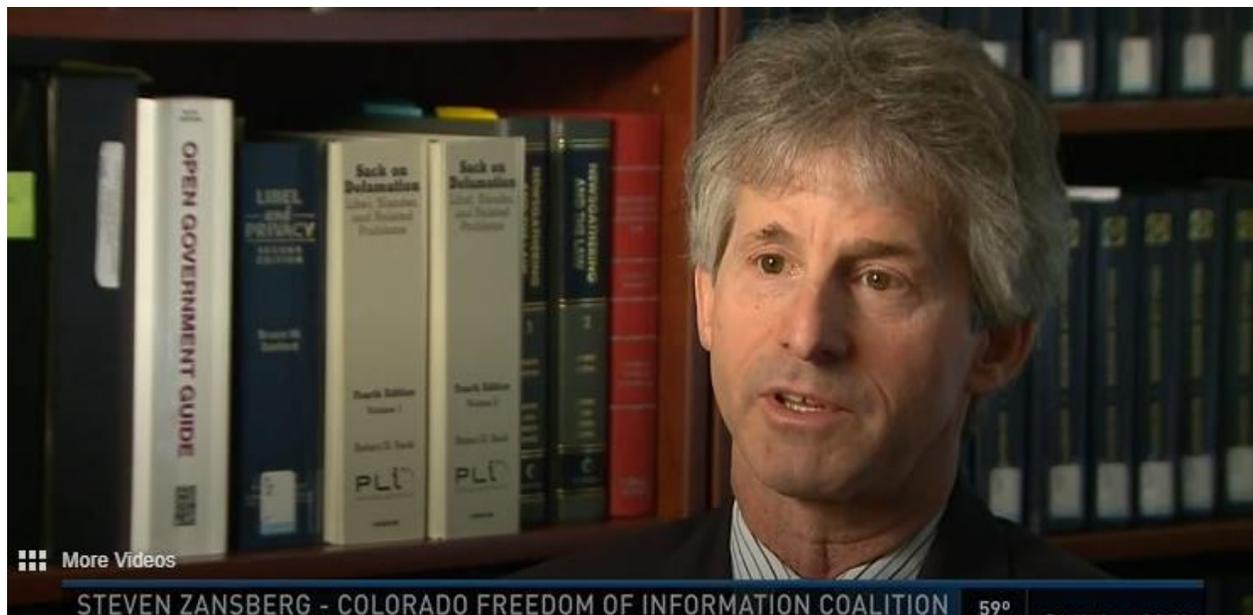


Ten Questions to a Media Lawyer: Steve Zansberg



Steve was a partner at the First Amendment boutique law firm Levine Sullivan Koch & Schulz, which merged with Ballard Spahr in October 2017. He launched his solo practice in January 2021.

How'd you get interested in media law? What was your first job in the business?

As a former documentary producer for public television (KQED-TV in San Francisco), my first year of law school was as a Journalism Fellow, courtesy of the Knight-Ridder Foundation. Having been an electronic journalist for several years, I was drawn to media and First Amendment law. Following my graduation and clerkship in the Ninth Circuit, I began practicing with (and under the mentorship of) Tom Kelley at the Denver office of what was then Faegre & Benson.

What do you like most about your job? What do you like least?

What I enjoy most is working with dedicated reporters in helping devise strategies to “get the story,” tell it in a compelling and well-sourced manner, and (through pre-pub review) make it as “bullet proof” as possible. My least favorite part is dealing with the “business side” of the practice of law.

How has quarantine affected your work and routines?

As a result of the extended period of working from home, I decided, in January, to depart from a national law firm to launch my own solo practice. That is, by far, the biggest change in my work routine. I've also had the opportunity, now, to argue before several courts via Zoom/ Webex, including two evidentiary hearings. As others have discussed previously, the “craft” of



Left, cover of “Hit Man,” a how-to guide for murderers for hire, and subject of a First Amendment case in the Fourth Circuit that Zansberg worked on with Lee Levine, Tom Kelley, Seth Berlin and Ashley Kissinger. Right: detail from the journal of one of the Columbine High School shooters. Zansberg argued before Colorado’s Supreme Court for The Denver Post to gain access.

oral argument and witness examination is dramatically different via videoconference than in person, in court.

Highest profile or most memorable case?

Highest profile cases were (1) the “Hit Man” case in the Fourth Circuit, (2) gaining access, under Colorado’s Public Records law, to the killers’ personal journals in the Columbine High School shooting, and (3) challenging the prior restraint order issued by the trial judge presiding over the short-lived sexual assault prosecution of Kobe Bryant. Personally, my most memorable case was *Bustos v. A&E Television Networks*, 646 F.3d 762 (10th Cir. 2011), not because of the excellent opinion penned by now Justice Neil Gorsuch, but because David Sternbach (of A&E Television) & I went into the ADX Maximum Security federal penitentiary in Florence, Colorado to take the plaintiff’s deposition (though we were not given access to the actual cell blocks where the nation’s most dangerous criminals are confined, inhumanely).

It’s almost a cliché for lawyers to tell others not to go to law school. What do you think?

Law school provides a solid training in analytical thinking and persuasive communication that can help J.D.s in pursuing a multitude of career paths. However, I generally advise people contemplating going to law school to first decide what they would like to do with their law degree, before they apply, and not to treat the three-year graduate program as “advanced undecided.” I also advise people to first pursue their “real passion(s)” professionally, if they have any, prior to going to law school (a/k/a the school of last resort).



Zansberg at his home office in Denver

What’s your home office set-up?

Since August 2020, I have literally been living (and working) in the basement of my in-laws’ house in Greeley, an hour and change North of Denver. I have a more functional home office in Denver (pictured above).

What’s a book, show, song, movie, podcast or activity that’s been keeping you entertained?

I thoroughly enjoyed watching all six seasons of Schitt’s Creek, especially Seasons 4 & 5. I also very much enjoyed the book Apeirogon by Colum McCann; I highly recommend it.

What’s a typical weekday lunch?

I typically grab some fruit and vegetables and eat at my desk. “Lunch” is a misnomer for my eating habits: I’m pretty much shoving something crunchy (nuts, granola, trail mix, or carrots) or sweet (grapes, oranges, apples) into my mouth throughout the day.

Your most important client takes you out for karaoke. What do you sing?

Toss up: “Born to Run” or “Brown-Eyed Girl.”

Where’s the first place you’d like to go when the quarantine is lifted?

Spain and Portugal.