



Congress must stop sex trafficking on the internet

Marsha Blackburn Published 7:13 a.m. CT Nov. 29, 2017



(Photo: Larry McCormack / THE TENNESSEAN)

Recently in Brentwood, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) arrested 22 men for soliciting sex with a minor through backpage.com.

This was the 11th sting conducted by the TBI since 2015. This activity is beyond reprehensible, and the internet has only made it easier for sex traffickers to operate in the shadows.

We must act legislatively to give law enforcement the tools they need to protect children.

On Thursday, I will chair a hearing on the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology on H.R. 1865, “Allowing States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017,” which was introduced earlier this year by Rep. Ann Wagner.

This bill will clarify that law enforcement may take actions against morally repugnant websites that facilitate sex trafficking, regardless of the immunity they otherwise enjoy for user-generated content.

While to many Americans, the internet has been a source of inspiration and a platform for innovation, there is unquestionably a dark side to the web.

The anonymity of the internet provides cover for criminals to recruit trafficking victims and find buyers or sellers, exploiting some of our most vulnerable populations for profit – particularly children. Standing by idly is simply not an option.

Read More: [22 indicted in 'significant' Brentwood human trafficking sting \(/story/news/local/williamson/brentwood/2017/11/09/tbi-announces-significant-human-trafficking-sting-brentwood-22-indicted-brentwood-human-trafficking/848135001/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2017/11/09/tbi-announces-significant-human-trafficking-sting-brentwood-22-indicted-brentwood-human-trafficking/848135001/)

For many years, Congress has given the tech community a free pass on this and other concerns. But while a light-touch regulatory approach is necessary to allow the internet ecosystem to flourish, there must be a balance for a mature industry that serves so many important purposes in our society.

With maturity comes responsibility, and it is time that we hold companies accountable for their actions when they cross the line.

This certainly does not mean that we intend to push heavy-handed regulation, but there must be consequences for turning a blind eye to conduct that shocks the moral conscience and victimizes children.

It is incumbent upon the Congress to act to keep up with the technological advances that have led to an explosion in sex trafficking.

So often in Washington, we are faced with a situation where the House acts, and the Senate fails to do so. However, this time, the Senate has moved first with the Commerce Committee’s approval of SESTA (the “Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act”), and while the bill isn’t perfect, it would give law enforcement some new tools to address an ancient problem.

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The committee members have accomplished what many believed to be impossible – bringing together victims’ rights groups and tech companies to take a proactive step in protecting current and potential victims of sex trafficking. With some more work, I believe the bill currently before the House could achieve the same goals.

We have a real chance to take a step in the right direction. Federal legislation here would be good for the people of Tennessee, and good for the people of the United States.

I am determined to do whatever I can to help legislation move through the House, and to lend a helping hand to those groups who work so tirelessly for victims who cannot speak for themselves.