

THE WAR ON SEX

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97 voted in favor, and only two were opposed. One month before that, it passed the House of Representatives with a 388-25 vote.

On the surface, this bill seems well-intentioned. It was even endorsed by organizations like World Without Exploitation, as well as the parents of children who were victims of sex trafficking. The legislation was advertised as a way to protect trafficked girls from serial rape by holding online platform owners legally responsible. But there's a glaring problem with this approach: Sites like Craigslist and Backpage are now liable for discussion around sex, forcing these platforms to censor their users or shut down completely.

There was something else many overlooked. While SESTA-FOSTA are supposedly targeting traffickers, the bill actually amends Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act – excluding those who use the Internet to “promote or facilitate prostitution.” Loose translation: This bill will be going after those who consent to sex work, such as escorts – as well as other areas of the industry.

“SESTA-FOSTA was dressed up as a way to help victims. In reality, it not only hurts victims by shoving them underground, it directly targets and harms voluntary sex workers,” explains Melissa Mariposa, sex worker and founder of Red Umbrella Hosting. “While it’s doing that, it’s also stripping away the digital rights and first amendment rights of every US citizen.”

A HISTORY OF STIGMA AND CENSORSHIP

This isn't the first time that the stigma of sex has been used to stifle voices online. Even before the bill was passed, platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were censoring users – particularly sex workers and activists, who post what these platforms deemed as “inappropriate sexual content.” This censorship comes in many forms, ranging from removing content without warning to outright suspension. And it extends beyond social media: Amazon has recently been called out for shadow-banning erotica by hiding these novels from appearing in its search results.

“To be completely honest, I’ve lost count,” says activist Sasha Scarr when asked how many times they’ve been banned from Facebook. “Since 2011, I’ve had to have been banned over 130 times. The majority of those are post blocks. I’ve had 27 Facebook accounts so far. I’ve also been banned from Twitter, Instagram and Medium for outing TERFs, rapists and pedophiles, along with showing my breasts.”

Sasha continues: “Neo-nazis were being allowed to organize on these platforms, but posts about Angela Davis were removed for ‘nudity.’ Men ran around shirtless, but my breasts somehow ‘incited violence.’”

HOW THESE LAWS ARE DANGEROUS

This stigma around sex can not only affect sex workers’ online presence or livelihood, but it can also be life-threatening. This is because sex work becomes significantly more dangerous when providers are forced underground due to laws like FOSTA-SESTA treating them like victims.

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Scott Cunningham, an economist interested in the effects of technology and policy on sex work, co-authored a study that explored the risks in countries that prohibit it. This study titled ‘Decriminalizing Indoor Prostitution: Implications for Sexual Violence and Public Health’ focused specifically on the United States. In it, Scott suggests that sex work is the most dangerous job for American women.

“It has a homicide rate of over 200 per 100,000 people. The second most dangerous job for a female is a liquor store employee, and that has a homicide rate of 4 per 100,000. So it’s just unbelievably dangerous,” Scott stated in an interview by Reply All.

There has been one thing making sex work safer, though: The Internet. Instead of having to decide within minutes whether a client looks safe enough to get in their car, sex workers have moved indoors to create



layers of safety for themselves. Online, they can create their own websites, ask for references, get support from other providers and scroll through blacklists (information about bad or dangerous clients). So the same sites that were under fire by SESTA-FOSTA were actually helping to wave in a new generation of sex workers who have never had to work on the streets.

EMERGING ONLINE ALTERNATIVES

The aftermath of SESTA/FOSTA has proven that online classifieds and community-based groups are an important outlet for free expression, knowledge sharing and establishment of personal safety. That's why some

have taken the initiative to create judgment-free virtual tools and communities to support sex workers while their advertising venues, websites and social media accounts are disappearing.

RED UMBRELLA HOSTING

Sex worker-owned and operated, Red Umbrella Hosting acts as an alternative to traditional web hosting where people don't have to worry about getting reported for nudity or skirting a Terms of Service agreement.

"Red Umbrella was founded shortly after SESTA-FOSTA was announced as a preventative measure. It seemed obvious to me that hosts and registrars would have to start actively policing adult content once this became law," says founder Melissa Mariposa. "It became law a lot sooner than I thought, and a mass of sites have gone dark very quickly."

There are three hosting services available: Managed Wordpress, domain hosting and premium hosting. Every option comes with a free SSL certificate and access to web statistics. Red Umbrella also offers concealed payment options, such as Amazon gift cards. That way, someone can pay for the gift card with cash and send the code so there's no trace on either side.

And yes, it's fully legal.

"The server isn't in the jurisdiction of the U.S. and it's not breaking any laws in the jurisdiction it's located," Melissa explains. "I'm not responsible for the content of the people I sell hosting to. I do have a [Terms of Service] which is strictly enforced, but by the standards I would call it extremely open minded."


SWITTER

Created late March in response to the recent effects of SESTA-FOSTA, Switter is an open and free social space open to anyone in the sex industry. It was founded by Assembly Four, a collective

of sex workers and technologists whose mission is to build services to empower sex workers.

"We set up Switter as a sex work-friendly alternative to mainstream social media which often censored workers... It's an open and free community where sex workers chat to fans, release new shoots, announce tour dates and whatever else they'd like to share," says C from Assembly Four. At this stage, Assembly Four members wish to have their identities concealed. C added later: "We are of course under legal counsel and will do as much as we can to ensure that Switter is kept alive throughout and beyond this period of adjustment."

Switter is built on Mastodon, the world's largest open source and decentralized social platform. This is par-



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tially so that it wouldn't have to be built from scratch, but having Switter on Mastodon allows anyone free access to this new online community – regardless of demographic.

"We figured it was more important to create Switter sooner than later so there would be a place for sex workers to go before existing communication platforms were shut down," C says. "With Mastodon, we are able to remain connected to the public, which is important if we're ever to remove the stigma around sex work."

A NEW LANDSCAPE FOR SEX WORK

No one is sure what the new market for sex work will look like. According to Scott, we're at the beginning of

what he thinks will be the largest natural experiment in sex work policy in American history. And if the existing rhetoric is any indication, it's not hopeful. He even told Reply All: "If [sex workers] end up having to go back to the streets, if they end up having to work with clients that they were not able to check out before or screen in any way, they are going to die...There will be no more references, there will be no more blacklists – I can't imagine that any of the safety infrastructure is going to be there."

C adds that the passing of SESTA-FOSTA affects more than just sex work: "People aren't understanding that this is not merely an attack on sex workers, but an attack on free speech. It's an attack on the First Amendment. It's the beginning of online censorship."