

No. 22-15290

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IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

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J.B.,

PLAINTIFF–APPELLANT,

v.

CRAIGSLIST, INC.,

DEFENDANT–APPELLEE.

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On Appeal from the United States District Court  
for the Northern District of California  
The Honorable Haywood S. Gilliam, Jr.  
District Court Case No. 4:19-cv-07848-HSG

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**BRIEF OF AMICI CURIAE AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION,  
AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA,  
AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA,  
CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY & TECHNOLOGY, CENTER FOR LGBTQ  
ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT & RESEARCH, ENGINE ADVOCACY,  
FREEDOM UNITED, FREE SPEECH COALITION, POSITIVE WOMEN’S  
NETWORK-USA, REFRAME HEALTH AND JUSTICE, SEX WORKERS  
OUTREACH PROJECT LOS ANGELES, AND THE SEX WORKERS  
PROJECT OF THE URBAN JUSTICE CENTER IN SUPPORT OF  
DEFENDANT–APPELLEE AND AFFIRMANCE**

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## **CORPORATE DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

Pursuant to Rules 26.1 and 29(a)(4)(A) of the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure, amici curiae state that they do not have a parent corporation and that no publicly held corporation owns 10% or more of their stock.

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## STATEMENT OF INTEREST

The **American Civil Liberties Union** (ACLU) is a nationwide, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to defending the principles embodied in the Federal Constitution and our nation's civil rights laws. The **ACLU of Northern California** is the Northern California affiliate of the ACLU. The **ACLU of Southern California** is the Southern California affiliate of the ACLU. Since its founding in 1920, the ACLU has frequently appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court, this Court, and other federal courts in cases defending Americans' free speech and freedom of association, including their exercise of those rights online. *See, e.g., Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 844 (1997) (counsel); *NetChoice, LLC v. Att'y Gen. of Fla.*, 34 F.4th 1196 (11th Cir. 2022) (amici). Through its LGBTQ & HIV Project, the ACLU advocates for the equal rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and people living with HIV. The ACLU also works to reform laws that harm sex workers, or discriminatorily target trans sex workers and sex workers of color. *See, e.g., Erotic Serv. Provider Legal Educ. & Rsch. Proj. v. Gascon*, 880 F.3d 450 (9th Cir.), *amended by* 881 F.3d 792 (9th Cir. 2018) (mem.) (amici).

The **Center for Democracy & Technology** (CDT) is a nonprofit public interest organization. For more than twenty-five years, CDT has represented the public's interest in an open, decentralized Internet and worked to ensure that the constitutional and democratic values of free expression and privacy are protected in

the digital age. CDT regularly advocates before legislatures, regulatory agencies, and courts in support of First Amendment rights on the Internet and other protections for online speech, including limits on intermediary liability for user-generated content.

**Center for LGBTQ Economic Advancement & Research (CLEAR)** is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization. CLEAR's mission is to empower LGBTQ+ households, organizations, and communities with fair and equal access to LGBTQ+-affirming financial education and services to meet underserved LGBTQ+ financial needs. CLEAR produces research and advocacy around LGBTQ+ consumer issues, including consumer data and privacy issues, promoting LGBTQ+ people's ability to freely and authentically express themselves online using digital platforms, and ensuring their freedom from unfair policies that disproportionately target and exclude content about and created by LGBTQ+ people and communities.

**Engine Advocacy** is a nonprofit technology policy, research, and advocacy organization that bridges the gap between policymakers and startups. Engine works with government representatives and a community of high-technology, growth-oriented startups across the nation to support the development of technology entrepreneurship.

**Freedom United** is an international anti-trafficking organization that advocates for effective and rights-based approaches to preventing human trafficking

and supporting victims and survivors. As an anti-trafficking organization, Freedom United advocates for full decriminalization of sex work in order to build resilience to trafficking. Decriminalization should extend to online spaces as well.

**Free Speech Coalition (FSC)** is a nonprofit trade and advocacy association defending the rights and freedoms of the adult industry and its workers. FSC fights for a world in which body sovereignty is recognized, sexual expression is destigmatized, and sex work is decriminalized.

**Positive Women's Network-USA (PWN-USA)** is a national organization building power by and for women and people of trans experience living with HIV, with a focus on those communities most impacted by the epidemic. PWN-USA envisions a future in which our communities are no longer subject to over-policing, surveillance, and brutality from the criminal legal system; and where those with a history of interaction with the criminal legal system have full rights, dignity, and bodily autonomy. PWN-USA works to advance strategic collaboration between the HIV decriminalization movement and efforts to decriminalize sex work.

**Reframe Health and Justice (RHJ)** is a collective of advocates working at the intersection of harm reduction, criminal-legal reform and healing. RHJ has over thirty years of collective experience specifically focused on the health and safety of sex workers across the country as community organizers, advocates for policy change, service providers and experts offering training and technical assistance. As

harm reductionists, RHJ works on developing and disseminating harm reduction tools and information for people who trade sex to combat interpersonal violence, exploitation and trafficking, and poor health outcomes.

**Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOPLA)** is a peer-based sex worker support and mutual aid group, whose members and community saw firsthand how FOSTA/SESTA made it harder for people to stay safe and survive. In their capacity as sex workers and in their capacity as mutual aid and harm reduction organizers, SWOPLA has seen how essential it is to have access to both private & encrypted channels of communication and to uncensored public channels of communication. SWOPLA has also seen how expanded enforcement of prohibitions meant to ‘indirectly’ curb sex trafficking ends up increasing violence against sex workers, trafficking victims, and other survivors of abuse alike, by directly empowering abuse at the hands of law enforcement and other third parties and by creating an environment where communication, support, and services are more difficult to safely access.

The **Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center (SWP)** is a national organization that defends the human rights of sex workers by destigmatizing and decriminalizing people in the sex trades through free legal services, education, research, and policy advocacy. As one of the only U.S. organizations meeting the

needs of both sex workers and trafficking victims, SWP serves a marginalized community that few others reach.

**SOURCE OF AUTHORITY TO FILE**

Counsel for Plaintiff–Appellant do not object, and counsel for Defendant–Appellee consent, to the filing of this brief. *See* Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(2); L.R. 29-2(a).

**FED. R. APP. P. 29(a)(4)(E) STATEMENT**

Amici declare that:

1. no party’s counsel authored the brief in whole or in part;
2. no party or party’s counsel contributed money intended to fund preparing or submitting the brief; and
3. no person, other than amici, their members, or their counsel, contributed money intended to fund preparing or submitting the brief.

## INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

Online intermediaries play an essential role in facilitating the speech of hundreds of millions of people. In part, they play the role that book, magazine, and video stores and distributors traditionally played in enabling public access to educational information, art, political speech, and more—only at an even more massive scale. Search engines like Google and DuckDuckGo direct people to content; social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Pinterest allow people to post their own content; and Web-infrastructure services like Amazon Web Services and Cloudflare make it possible to access content online. Like newspaper classified pages or penny-savers, craigslist and other online classified services distribute the speech of others seeking or offering jobs, housing, goods, and more. *Craigslist*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craigslist> (last visited Aug. 5, 2022) [<https://perma.cc/WB8M-2JYS>].

Recognizing the importance of online intermediaries and the risks that imposing open-ended liability on them could pose to communication, Congress enacted Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act in 1996. 47 U.S.C. § 230 (“Section 230”). The law immunizes interactive computer service providers, including the kinds of intermediaries identified above, from most civil liability and state law criminal charges predicated on the speech of their users. As this Court and others have recognized, Section 230(c)(1) “precludes” liability for the exercise of a



“publisher’s traditional editorial functions . . . such as deciding whether to publish, withdraw, postpone or alter content.” *Barnes v. Yahoo!, Inc.*, 570 F.3d 1096, 1102 (9th Cir. 2009) (citing *Zeran v. Am. Online, Inc.*, 129 F.3d 327, 330 (4th Cir. 1997)).

In 2018, Congress amended Section 230 through the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act/Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, Pub. L. No. 115-164, 132 Stat. 1253 (2018) (“FOSTA”). FOSTA expanded the existing criminal provisions codified in 18 U.S.C. § 1591(a) and created a new federal crime related to sex trafficking. Most relevant to this case, it also amended Section 230 to permit civil causes of action for participating in a sex trafficking venture under 18 U.S.C. § 1595—but only “if the conduct underlying the claim constitutes a violation of [18 U.S.C. § 1591].” 47 U.S.C. § 230(e)(5)(A). Although Section 1595 allows for liability where a participant “knew or should have known” the venture was illegal, Section 1591 requires knowing participation or, for offenses not related to advertising a person for sex trafficking, reckless disregard.

The issue in this case is what level of knowledge an intermediary must have to lose immunity under Section 230(e)(5)(A) and thereby be subject to civil liability: constructive knowledge, as under Section 1595, or actual knowledge, as under Section 1591. The court below correctly required actual knowledge, holding that, to lose immunity from a civil beneficiary claim under Section 1595, an intermediary’s

own conduct must meet the criminal mens rea standard of Section 1591. *J.B. v. G6 Hosp., LLC*, No. 19-07848, 2021 WL 4079207, at \*39 (N.D. Cal. Sept. 8, 2021).

This Court should uphold that ruling. Imposing liability on an intermediary based on constructive knowledge would raise serious First Amendment questions. Courts have historically recognized that the scienter requirement imposed on intermediaries, including booksellers and distributors, is a constitutional issue given the unique role these entities play in facilitating speech. Imposing liability on them can have a severe, unconstitutional chilling effect that substantially diminishes the universe of materials available to the public.

The same is equally, if not more, true for online intermediaries, which act as funnels for billions of pieces of content every day. Given the scale of the speech they enable, imposing liability on online intermediaries on the basis of mere constructive knowledge would have disastrous consequences for users: Intermediaries would choose either to remove protected, societally beneficial content or even whole services, to avoid the threat of liability—thereby depleting the full scope of speech and information available to the public—or they would try to avoid learning about potentially illegal content appearing there—thereby foregoing content moderation on their sites.

Plaintiff's interpretation of Section 230(e)(5)(A) would adversely affect the myriad services offered over the Internet by intermediaries and ultimately limit

users' speech and access to information. The district court's holding that an intermediary's loss of immunity under Section 230(e)(5)(A) cannot be based on constructive knowledge avoids both constitutional problems and dire practical effects. Therefore, this Court should affirm the district court's grant of craigslist's motion to dismiss.

## ARGUMENT

### **I. Serious First Amendment questions would arise if courts were to construe FOSTA to allow civil liability based on mere constructive knowledge.**

The principle of constitutional avoidance holds that courts should adopt a statutory construction that avoids “grave and doubtful constitutional questions.” *Bond v. United States*, 572 U.S. 844, 869 (2014) (Scalia, J. concurring). Construing FOSTA to allow online intermediaries to face civil liability without any actual knowledge or awareness of sex trafficking occurring on their sites would raise serious First Amendment questions. This Court can and should avoid determining what scienter requirement is robust enough to avoid chilling speech and undermining First Amendment interests by holding that FOSTA does not impose liability on intermediaries based on constructive knowledge.

Though the Supreme Court has not squarely determined what level of scienter a plaintiff must show to hold a distributor liable for carrying obscenity or child pornography, it has made clear that the answer implicates the First Amendment. This

is because the imposition of liability with too low a scienter requirement has a chilling effect. It “tends to impose a severe limitation on the public’s access to constitutionally protected matter” by “stifl[ing] the flow of democratic expression and controversy at one of its chief sources.” *Smith v. California*, 361 U.S. 147, 152–53 (1959); *see also Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629, 644 (1968) (declining to further define the level of scienter required by the First Amendment where a New York statute prohibiting the knowing sale of obscenity to minors had been construed by the state’s highest court to reach “not innocent but calculated purveyance of filth”).

As the Supreme Court has explained, “if [a] bookseller is criminally liable without knowledge of the contents . . . he will tend to restrict the books he sells to those he has inspected.” *Smith*, 361 U.S. at 153. And “[i]f the contents of bookshops and periodical stands were restricted to material of which their proprietors had made an inspection, they might be depleted indeed.” *Id.*

This Court has similarly recognized that imposition of liability on distributors with too low a scienter requirement has chilling effects. In *Ripplinger v. Collins*, the Court determined that, for distributor liability, a “jury [must] find that the defendant knew of the ‘character or nature’ of the material” and that “a ‘suspicion’ of one scene of nudity or sexual activity” is not enough. 868 F.2d 1043, 1055 (9th Cir. 1989). Much like the Supreme Court, this Court was motivated by its concern that imposing

the latter standard “would require a bookseller to examine personally any book he had reason to believe contained sexual conduct to determine if it was obscene.” *Id.* at 1056 (citation omitted).

This applies with even more force to online intermediaries like craigslist, as well as Twitter, WhatsApp, Amazon Web Services, and others who will be governed by the outcome of this case. Historically, even when courts considered the universe of content available via a single magazine or bookstore, they recognized that, because “the distributor normally carries a multitude of [content],” their “self-censorship carries potentially more pervasive consequences.” *Lewis v. Time Inc.*, 83 F.R.D. 455, 465 (E.D. Cal. 1979), *aff’d*, 710 F.2d 549 (9th Cir. 1983); *see also Lerman v. Flynt Distrib. Co.*, 745 F.2d 123, 139 (2d Cir. 1984) (recognizing that requiring a distributor “to monitor each issue of every periodical it distributes . . . would be an impermissible burden on the First Amendment”). Those consequences are magnified online, where millions of users “communicate with one another and [] access vast amounts of information from around the world.” *Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 844, 850 (1997); *see also Carafano v. Metrosplash.com, Inc.*, 339 F.3d 1119, 1123–24 (9th Cir. 2003) (describing “[t]he amount of information communicated via [online intermediaries]” as “staggering”) (quoting *Zeran*, 129 F.3d at 330–31).

As this Court recognized nearly two decades ago, “[i]t would be impossible for service providers to screen each of their millions of postings for possible

problems. Faced with potential liability for each message . . . interactive computer service providers might choose to severely restrict the number and type of messages posted.” *Id.* at 1124 (quoting *Zeran*, 129 F.3d at 330–31). That is why “[t]he specter of [] liability in an area of such prolific speech [has] an obvious chilling effect,” *id.* (quoting *Zeran*, 129 F.3d at 330–31)—as shown by the real-world impacts of FOSTA described *infra* Section II.B.

At the same time, online intermediaries typically have little control over the content users post on their services—and that, too, contributes to the chilling effect that imposing liability without actual knowledge would have. This is one reason that the First Amendment distinguishes between creators of illegal materials and those who make them available. For example, “[t]hose who arrange for minors to appear in sexually explicit materials are in a far different position from those who merely handle the visual images after they are fixed on paper, celluloid or magnetic tape.” *United States v. U.S. Dist. Ct. Cent. Dist. of Cal.*, 858 F.2d 534, 543 n.6 (9th Cir. 1988). “While it would undoubtedly chill the distribution of books and films if sellers were burdened with learning . . . the content of all of the materials they carry . . . producers are in a position to know or learn” that information. *Id.*; *see also United States v. X-Citement Video, Inc.*, 513 U.S. 64, 77 n.5 (1994) (explaining that a video store must have a higher scienter than a producer in order to be liable for distributing

child pornography because of “the reality that producers are more conveniently able to ascertain” information about the content).<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the liability at issue here is civil does not change the analysis. “What a State may not constitutionally bring about by means of a criminal statute is likewise beyond the reach of its civil law,” for “[t]he fear of damage awards . . . may be markedly more inhibiting than the fear of prosecution under a criminal statute.” *N.Y. Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254, 277 (1964); *see also Lewis*, 83 F.R.D. at 464 (“It makes no difference that here we deal with civil liability.”).

Indeed, in *Manual Enterprises, Inc. v. Day*, the Supreme Court reversed a lower court’s determination that the government could civilly bar distribution of magazines without, at a minimum, first establishing that the magazine publisher “knew that at least some of his advertisers were offering to sell obscene material.” 370 U.S. 478, 492 (1962). In the opinion offering the narrowest grounds for the judgment and therefore the holding of the case, *see Marks v. United States*, 430 U.S. 188, 193 (1977), Justice Harlan, joined by Justice Stewart, explained that “a

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<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting that individuals and organizations engaging in constitutionally protected online speech are challenging FOSTA’s constitutionality in the courts. For example, the plaintiffs in *Woodhull Freedom Foundation v. United States*, No. 18-1552, 2022 WL 910600 (D.D.C. Mar. 29, 2022), *appeal docketed*, No. 22-5105 (D.C. Cir. Apr. 28, 2022), assert that Section 1591(e) violates the First Amendment and the Due Process Clause by making “assisting, supporting, or facilitating” sex trafficking a violation of federal law without specifying what those acts entail.

substantial constitutional question would arise were we to construe [the law] as not requiring proof of scienter in civil proceedings.” *Manual Enters., Inc.*, 370 U.S. at 492.<sup>2</sup>

While noting that the statute at issue in *Smith* was criminal, the justices concluded that its logic must also apply to a civil penalty, because the “heavy financial sacrifice” a civil judgment could entail would as effectively “‘impose a severe limitation on the public’s access to constitutionally protected matter,’ as would a state obscenity statute[.]” *Id.* at 492–93 (quoting *Smith*, 361 U.S. at 153). Faced with potential civil liability, “a magazine publisher might refrain from accepting . . . materials[] which might otherwise be entitled to constitutional protection,” thus “depriv[ing] such materials . . . of a legitimate and recognized avenue of access to the public.” *Id.* at 493. The same is true here: opening the door to civil suits on the basis of constructive knowledge would raise a serious First Amendment question and severely chill online speech—a result that this Court can avoid by affirming that Section 230(e)(5)(A) requires actual knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> In a separate opinion, Justice Brennan, joined by Chief Justice Warren and Justice Douglas, concluded that the civil law did not authorize the Postmaster General to employ his own administrative process to close the mail to obscene publications. *Manual Enters., Inc.*, 370 U.S. at 519 (Brennan, J., concurring). Those justices, too, recognized the “constitutional difficulty tha[t] inheres in” determining the scienter required by the First Amendment for a civil order. *Id.* at 498.



**II. Given the realities of how intermediaries moderate content, an actual knowledge standard is critical to ensuring that online expression remains free and robust.**

The First Amendment implications of expanding liability under FOSTA are not hypothetical. Although courts have had limited opportunities to interpret the meaning of the amended civil liability provisions of Section 230, the other sections of FOSTA, which expanded criminal liability based on at least a knowing mens rea, have already had a significant and harmful effect on online speech, association, and safety—especially that of sex workers and the very children FOSTA sought to protect. Opening the door to civil liability on the basis of mere constructive knowledge would exacerbate those harms.

A. Congress enacted Section 230 to foster freedom of expression online, informed by how intermediaries moderate content.

Section 230 was informed by Congress’ understanding of how exposing intermediaries to liability for content posted by their users would influence their content moderation decisions and restrict user speech. Congress correctly recognized that “[f]aced with potential liability for each message republished by their services, interactive computer service providers might choose to severely restrict the number and type of messages posted.” *Zeran*, 129 F.3d at 331; *see also Jones v. Dirty World Ent. Recordings LLC*, 755 F.3d 398, 407 (6th Cir. 2014) (describing how Section 230 protects unpopular online speech against a “heckler’s veto”).

To avoid these chilling effects, Section 230 “forbids the imposition of publisher liability on a service provider for the exercise of its editorial and self-regulatory functions,” including the moderation of content. *Zeran*, 129 F.3d at 331. Indeed, an “important purpose of [Section] 230 was to encourage service providers to self-regulate the dissemination of offensive material over their services.” *Id.* For that reason, Section 230 barred both strict liability and notice-based liability, as either “would deter service providers from regulating the dissemination of offensive material over their own services.” *Id.* at 333.

Nevertheless, Section 230 included several narrow exceptions to the immunity it provided, such as for violations of federal criminal law. In 2018, Congress added a further exception as part of FOSTA to address Congress’ concern that some websites had avoided liability for knowingly engaging in sex trafficking. *See* S. Rep. No. 115-199, at 4 (2018) (explaining, in the committee report accompanying the Senate bill, that the purpose of FOSTA is to ensure that an interactive computer service “cannot avoid liability” if it is “knowingly assisting, supporting, or facilitating sex trafficking”). Contrary to Plaintiff’s claim that Section 230(e)(5)(A) removes online intermediaries’ immunity for *all* claims brought under Section 1595, *see* Appellant’s Opening Br. at 33–38, by targeting FOSTA’s Section 230(e)(5)(A) revision at intermediaries that knowingly engage in sex trafficking, Congress attempted to create a limited exception to immunity that

would not undermine Section 230’s overall purpose of protecting online freedom of expression.

B. FOSTA has already harmed online speech and online communities.

In addition to the civil implications at issue here, FOSTA expanded the existing criminal provisions codified in 18 U.S.C. § 1591(a), which falls within Section 230’s pre-FOSTA exception for federal criminal prosecutions. Congress expanded that section, which had previously applied only to constitutionally unprotected speech, *see Backpage.com, LLC v. Lynch*, 216 F. Supp. 3d 96, 106 (D.D.C. 2016), to reach any “knowing assistance of, support for, or facilitation of” a violation of Section 1591(a)(1). 18 U.S.C. § 1591(e)(4) (cleaned up). FOSTA also amended Section 230 to allow state authorities to prosecute interactive communications services under state law if the underlying conduct would violate 18 U.S.C. § 1591. And it created a new federal crime, codified at 18 U.S.C. § 2421A, prohibiting the use or attempted use of any facility of interstate commerce to promote or facilitate the prostitution of another person.

A June 2021 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) showed that federal prosecutors had not used the additional criminal penalties established by FOSTA.<sup>3</sup> At that time—more than three years after the passage of the law—

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Gov’t Accountability Off., GAO-21-385, *Sex Trafficking: Online Platforms and Federal Prosecutions* 25 (2021), <https://bit.ly/3mUc1YV>.

the Department of Justice had prosecuted only one case using FOSTA.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the GAO reported that “gathering tips and evidence to investigate and prosecute those who control or use online platforms has become more difficult,” including investigating crimes against children.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, FOSTA has incentivized intermediaries to remove lawful content about sex work, sex, and sexuality—and it has made sex work more dangerous and sex trafficking harder to track.<sup>6</sup> Social media platforms like Instagram and Tumblr have broadly censored lawful topics related to sex to avoid liability.<sup>7</sup> Other platforms—especially niche, free, and queer websites—have gone offline entirely.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 20.

<sup>6</sup> See Kendra Albert et al., *FOSTA in Legal Context*, 52 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 1084, 1088–89 (2021). Recognizing the severity of these problems, members of Congress have introduced the SAFE SEX Workers Study Act to conduct a federal study on the actual impact of FOSTA on sex workers. See S. 3758, 117th Cong. (2022); H.R. 6928, 117th Cong. (2022).

<sup>7</sup> See Helen Holmes, “*First They Come for Sex Workers, Then They Come for Everyone*,” *Including Artists*, Observer (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3xDqCOD> (reporting that, in the wake of FOSTA, Instagram has removed accounts belonging to, as well as posts by, poets, writers, and artists discussing sex work); see also Shannon Liao, *Tumblr Will Ban All Adult Content on December 17th*, The Verge (Dec. 3, 2018), <https://bit.ly/2SmoC5A>.

<sup>8</sup> Kendra Albert, *Five Reflections from Four Years of FOSTA/SESTA* at 14, 41 Cardozo Arts & Ent. L. J. (forthcoming), available at <https://bit.ly/3MNUSiQ>.

This has pushed people in the sex trades, who work in legal, semi-legal, and criminalized industries, off online platforms and into dangerous and potentially life-threatening scenarios. In 2020, Hacking//Hustling conducted a study of FOSTA’s effects on sex workers. Researchers found that the law had increased “economic instability for 72.45% of the online [survey] participants . . . with 33.8% reporting an increase of violence from clients.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is not surprising given that many affordable ways to advertise have shut down following FOSTA.<sup>10</sup> This has made sex workers more vulnerable to labor exploitation, and also made labor trafficking in the sex industry less visible.<sup>11</sup>

FOSTA has also caused platforms to shut down harm reduction tools like “bad johns” lists<sup>12</sup> and “VerifyHim,” a system that helped sex workers vet clients by providing them with references. Individuals and harm reduction organizations also reported that FOSTA made them wary of sharing harm reduction and safety tips or doing check-ins with fellow workers.<sup>13</sup> Some sex workers have had to return to in-

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<sup>9</sup> Danielle Blunt & Ariel Wolf, Hacking//Hustling, *Erased: The Impact of FOSTA-SESTA & the Removal of Backpage* 18 (2020), <https://bit.ly/3d80p2Q>.

<sup>10</sup> #SurvivorsAgainstSESTA, *Documenting Tech Actions*, <https://bit.ly/3NH57Sq> (last visited Aug. 5, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Blunt & Wolf, *supra* note 9, at 18.

<sup>12</sup> Nitasha Tiku, *Craigslist Shuts Personal Ads for Fear of New Internet Law*, WIRED (Mar. 23, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3zzl88G>.

<sup>13</sup> Blunt & Wolf, *supra* note 9, at 33.

person client-seeking in bars and clubs, where screening is necessarily more rushed, and where workers are more vulnerable.<sup>14</sup> TheBody, an organization that publishes HIV-related information, news, support, and personal perspectives, reports that FOSTA has put sex workers at greater risk of HIV infection.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, FOSTA has caused some intermediaries, including craigslist, to remove individual posts as well as entire parts of their services intended for legal speech that is unrelated to sex work. One of the plaintiffs challenging the constitutionality of FOSTA is a licensed massage therapist who alleges he was injured “when craigslist . . . shut down certain services in response to FOSTA” and began removing his advertisements from its therapeutic services section. *Woodhull Freedom Found. v. United States*, 948 F.3d 363, 369–70 (D.C. Cir. 2020). craigslist also entirely removed its personal ads section shortly after FOSTA was passed because of the risk of potential lawsuits, regardless of their merit. Prachi Bhardwaj, *A Sex Trafficking Bill Passed by Congress Has Forced craigslist to Shut Down its Personals Section*, Bus. Insider (Mar. 23, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3ShlwQh>.

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<sup>14</sup> Jake Ketchum & Laura LeMoon, *What Sex Workers Have to Say About HIV After FOSTA/SESTA*, TheBody (July 3, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3ttYI4N> (Sex workers describing being forced from the relative safety of Internet work to the streets, “vastly increasing their vulnerability to . . . violence.”).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

C. Expanding civil liability under FOSTA to reach less-than-knowing conduct would exacerbate these problems.

Plaintiff's interpretation of FOSTA would further encourage online intermediaries to engage in undesirable content moderation practices, and would thereby exacerbate harms imposed on all Internet users, especially sex workers, healthcare workers, and teens. As reflected by the experiences detailed above, some intermediaries would respond by removing even more lawful content, including by using blunt automated tools to proactively detect potentially problematic content. Others might design their services to avoid learning facts that could be said to give them constructive knowledge about user-generated content, and might therefore carry content they would prefer not to in order to avoid any liability risk, potentially resulting in a bad experience for their users and customers.

1. *Plaintiff's interpretation of Section 230(e)(5)(A) would create a strong incentive for online intermediaries to over-remove user-generated content.*

Plaintiff argues that craigslist can be held liable on the basis of constructive knowledge. For proof of this knowledge, Plaintiff relies on allegations that advertisements for commercial sex had appeared on craigslist in the past and that craigslist knew that its erotic services and adult services sections had been used in the past "to sell adults and children for sex." *J.B.*, 2021 WL 4079207 at \*1–\*2. If the mere presence of prior sex trafficking content on their services and knowledge that a service had been used for sex trafficking in the past could expose

intermediaries to potential liability, they would likely respond by using aggressive or inexact means to proactively detect and remove even possibly problematic content. This would adversely impact the First Amendment interests of both users sharing content and those who receive it. *Lamont v. Postmaster Gen.*, 381 U.S. 301, 307 (1965); *Bd. of Educ. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 867 (1982) (opinion of Brennan, Marshall, & Stevens, JJ.).

The sheer volume and diversity of material transmitted by billions of Internet users makes it all but impossible for intermediaries to filter out all illegal or legally risky speech without simultaneously sweeping in, and restricting, a broad swath of lawful material.<sup>16</sup> As the Eighth Circuit recognized, a statute restricting sales of violent videos that “penaliz[ed] video dealers regardless of their knowledge of a video’s contents” would lead dealers to “limit videos available to the public to videos the dealers have viewed . . . [which] would impede rental and sale of all videos, including those that the statute does not purport to regulate and that the First Amendment fully protects.” *Video Software Dealers Ass’n v. Webster*, 968 F.2d 684, 690–91 (8th Cir. 1992) (citing *Smith*, 361 U.S. at 153–54).

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Zoe Kleinman, *Fury Over Facebook ‘Napalm Girl’ Censorship*, BBC News (Sept. 9, 2016), <https://bbc.in/2NkjVvf>.



In order to moderate content at scale, intermediaries often rely at least in part on automated content moderation tools.<sup>17</sup> But those tools increase the risk of over-removals of lawful content, in part because they tend to perpetuate real-world biases and are unable to understand context.<sup>18</sup> These limitations are inherent to the technology and will be extremely difficult if not impossible to overcome, even in the future.<sup>19</sup>

Imposing liability based on constructive knowledge is especially likely to encourage smaller intermediaries—which have fewer resources than services like Facebook, Google, and Twitter—to rely more heavily on off-the-shelf automated content moderation tools that indiscriminately remove constitutionally protected, beneficial speech, to the detriment of their users.<sup>20</sup> Further, smaller services designed

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<sup>17</sup> In general, automated tools for content moderation—which often take the form of content filters—fall into two categories: (1) matching tools, which “recogniz[e] something as identical or sufficiently similar to something [the tool] has seen before” and (2) prediction, which “recogniz[es] the nature of something based on the [tool’s] prior learning,” to “predict the likelihood that a previously-unseen piece of content violates a policy.” Carey Shenkman, Dhanaraj Thakur & Emma Llansó, Cent. Dem. & Tech., *Do You See What I See?* 12 (May 2021), <https://bit.ly/3H9YmGm>; Nafia Chowdhury, Stan. Freeman Spogli Inst. Int’l Studies, *Automated Content Moderation: A Primer* 2 (Mar. 19, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3zD96Lo>.

<sup>18</sup> See Chowdhury, *supra* note 17, at 3; see also Shenkman et al., *supra* note 17, at 7, 29; Natasha Duarte & Emma Llansó, Cent. Dem. & Tech., *Mixed Messages? The Limits of Automated Social Media Content Analysis* 14–19 (Nov. 28, 2017), <https://bit.ly/3MNVqoU>.

<sup>19</sup> See Duarte & Llansó, *supra* note 18, at 21.

<sup>20</sup> See *id.* at 13.

around a particular issue or community are more severely impacted when a topic or category of online speech becomes legally risky to host. Instagram, for example, could remove all posts related to sex and sexuality and continue to host other content of interest to their users. A service dedicated to youth sexual health, however, cannot remove content so indiscriminately and still serve its users' needs.

In short, if this Court adopts Plaintiff's reading of Section 230(e)(5)(A), online intermediaries will rely heavily on imprecise automated content moderation tools, which will indiscriminately detect, wrongly label, and remove a range of content that has nothing to do with sex trafficking.<sup>21</sup> Even intermediaries that do not increase their reliance on automated moderation will likely direct their human moderators to remove content more aggressively.

And much like the criminal provisions of FOSTA—which already have had an asymmetric impact on individuals depending on their sexual orientation,<sup>22</sup> race,<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Melanie Ehrenkranz, *British Cops Want to Use AI to Spot Porn—But it Keeps Mistaking Desert Pics for Nudes*, Gizmodo (Dec. 18, 2017), <https://bit.ly/3aVgHLd> (explaining that an automated system used to scan images for nudity often detects desert landscapes as human skin tones and erroneously flags them as “an indecent image or pornography”).

<sup>22</sup> See Gita Jackson, *Tumblr Is Trying to Win Back the Queer Audience it Drove Off*, Vice (May 11, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3tsFOeN>.

<sup>23</sup> Nosheen Iqbal, *Instagram ‘Censorship’ of Black Model’s Photo Reignites Claims of Race Bias*, The Guardian (Aug. 9, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3QeW7p7>.

and body-type<sup>24</sup>—these effects will not be felt equally. LGBTQ users are particularly likely to be censorship targets. For example, in 2019, Instagram banned six advertisements for the newsletter *Salty* which featured transgender and non-binary people of color, on the erroneous basis that the ads promoted escort services.<sup>25</sup> Another study showed that Perspective, an artificial intelligence tool created by Google to assign a “toxicity” score to online content, tended to rate tweets by drag queens as “on average more toxic than” those by white supremacists.<sup>26</sup> If intermediaries increase their reliance on automated filters intended to detect sexually explicit materials in order to minimize liability risk, these types of erroneous removals of content by and about LGBTQ people will increase.<sup>27</sup>

Over-censorship is also particularly likely for discussions of sex, sexual health, and sex work. This includes content intended to educate sex workers on their health and safety. For example, strippers who post videos to TikTok have reported

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<sup>24</sup> Lacey-Jade Christie, *Instagram Censored One of These Photos But Not the Other. We Must Ask Why*, The Guardian (Oct. 19, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3NH6ssq>.

<sup>25</sup> EJ Dickson, *Why Did Instagram Confuse These Ads Featuring LGBTQ People for Escort Ads?*, Rolling Stone (July 11, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3QiTgvI>.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Hay, *How AI Lets Bigots and Trolls Flourish While Censoring LGBTQ+ Voices*, Mic (Mar. 21, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3tuv3se>.

<sup>27</sup> See Adi Robertson, *Tumblr Is Settling with NYC’s Human Rights Agency Over Alleged Porn Ban Bias*, The Verge (Feb. 25, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3BE51aP> (reporting about a settlement agreement addressing Tumblr’s “algorithmic bias issues” that disproportionately affected LGBTQ users).

having “informational TikToks about sexual health, safety tips and general tutorials” targeted by removals or shadow bans.<sup>28</sup>

Sexual health information more generally is also at greater risk of removal, especially if it is aimed at minors. According to a 2020 report by UNESCO on digital sex education and young people, “sexuality education and information are increasingly being delivered through digital spaces, reaching millions.”<sup>29</sup> Yet online sexual educators already face over-removal of their content.<sup>30</sup> For example, sex educators on Instagram report facing bans and account removals and that “posts that use flagged words, like ‘sex’ and ‘clitoris,’ have been removed from Instagram’s search function.”<sup>31</sup> An intermediary concerned about liability under an interpretation of FOSTA that imposes liability without actual knowledge may, for example, err on

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<sup>28</sup> Madeleine Connors, *StripTok: Where the Workers Are V.I.P.s*, N.Y. Times (July 29, 2021), <https://nyti.ms/3HfXhgi>.

<sup>29</sup> Susie Jolly et al., UNESCO, *A Review of the Evidence: Sexuality Education for Young People in Digital Spaces* 7 (2020), <https://bit.ly/3OcGZXP>.

<sup>30</sup> See Amber Madison, *When Social-Media Companies Censor Sex Education*, The Atlantic (Mar. 4, 2015), <https://bit.ly/3H9gvnH> (reporting that Twitter, Facebook, and Google had rejected advertisements from various sexual health organizations as violating their policies prohibiting promotion of sexual or vulgar products or services).

<sup>31</sup> Abigail Moss, *‘Such a Backwards Step’: Instagram Is Now Censoring Sex Education Accounts*, Vice (Jan. 8, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3aQ2L5e>.

the side of removing content from Planned Parenthood’s Teen Council<sup>32</sup> or True Love Waits.<sup>33</sup>

As these examples show, the impact of interpreting FOSTA to allow for civil liability based on constructive knowledge will by no means be limited to intermediaries focused on sex work and sexual health. But these categories of content will face especially challenging hurdles even on general-interest platforms, as shown by this case and several other lawsuits in which plaintiffs are already seeking to impose liability on platforms merely for their day-to-day operations. *See, e.g., M.H. v. Omegle.com, LLC*, No. 21-814, 2022 WL 93575 (M.D. Fla. Jan. 10, 2022), *appeal docketed*, No. 22-10338 (11th Cir. Jan. 31, 2022) (alleging that chatroom website Omegle should be liable under Section 1595 because it “had knowledge of prior instances of sex trafficking and knew that the platform had been used as a sex trafficking tool in the past”); *M.L. v. craigslist, Inc.*, No. 19-6153, 2020 WL 6434845 (W.D. Wash. Apr. 17, 2020) (alleging that craigslist should be subject to beneficiary liability because it was generally aware “that [its] website hosted, facilitated, and aided the trafficking of minors” and had been “inform[ed]” about “how [its] website was used for purposes of human trafficking” by numerous

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<sup>32</sup> *E.g., Planned Parenthood, Teen Council*, <https://bit.ly/3MDG5IN> (last visited Aug. 5, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> *E.g., Lifeway, Help Students Understand Sexual Purity*, <https://bit.ly/3H9Nd8s> (last visited Aug. 5, 2022).

sources); Compl. at ¶¶ 8, 56, *Doe v. The Rocket Sci. Grp. LLC*, No. 19-5393 (N.D. Ga. Nov. 26, 2019) (alleging that MailChimp—a marketing platform—“made available its marketing resources and expertise” to a website that facilitated sex trafficking and so was “responsible for its natural consequences—the sex trafficking of Jane Doe”).

2. *Plaintiff’s interpretation of FOSTA could create a perverse incentive for some online intermediaries to deliberately ignore the content posted on their services.*

Some intermediaries may react in a different, but just as detrimental, way if this Court reverses the ruling below. An intermediary may well respond by making it difficult for users and others to inform it about alleged sex trafficking material or other objectionable content on its service. The intermediary may, for example, provide no public company contact information or other channels for users to report such content. Moreover, an intermediary may go so far as to not moderate content at all, so it can disclaim any alleged constructive knowledge of such content, such as Plaintiff’s claim that craigslist has constructive knowledge in part because it manually reviewed certain posts uploaded to its service.

These results ultimately harm users and the public. Making it harder for users to report content depicting sex trafficking will mean that more of it remains on an online service. Discouraging intermediaries from engaging in content moderation will also mean that a variety of content that intermediaries might otherwise choose

to regulate—including what they deem disinformation, hate speech, harassment, and promotion of suicide and self-harm—will instead spread unchecked. This outcome is not what Congress intended when it enacted Section 230, or when it passed FOSTA amending it.

### CONCLUSION

For these reasons, amici respectfully urge this Court to uphold the district court’s decision granting Defendant–Appellee’s motion to dismiss and to hold that loss of immunity under Section 230(e)(5)(A) cannot be based on constructive knowledge.

Dated: August 5, 2022

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**CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE FOR ELECTRONIC FILING**

I hereby certify that on August 5, 2022, I electronically filed the foregoing Amici Curiae Brief with the Clerk of the Court for the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit using the CM/ECF system, which effects service upon all counsel of record.

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## CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

I hereby certify that this brief contains 6,531 words, excluding the items exempted by Fed. R. App. P. 32(f), and complies with the length specifications set forth by Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(5). I further certify that this brief was prepared using 14-point Times New Roman font, in compliance with Fed. R. App. P. 32(a)(5) and (6).

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