

Mazzio, Oz: Kids are no match for 'Backpage'

By Mary Mazzio and Dr. Mehmet Oz
April 28, 2017

1



Photo: Igor Stepovik - Fotolia

What you are about to read is going to shock you.

Every minute of every day in this country, children are bought and sold for sex on the internet. Scheduled on the

hour, by the hour. With the ruthless efficiency of technology, these children are shuttled from motel room to motel room and raped upwards of 15 times per day. It happens to children of all incomes, ethnicities and color. Mostly girls, but also boys. Many are first preyed upon in chat rooms, at the mall, or at fast-food restaurants. And then these children simply disappear, without a trace.

Many of them do resurface, on a website called Backpage.com. According to a recent U.S. Senate report, this company, headquartered in Dallas, has earned hundreds of millions of dollars per year from its sex ads, including those of children. In all 50 states.

How can it be legal to host ads selling children for sex? It shouldn't be. Yet despite multiple lawsuits filed by child victims and a lengthy Senate investigation headed by Rob Portman, R-Ohio, and Claire McCaskill, D-Missouri, Backpage has dodged every bullet, winning every legal challenge to date. Armed with an expensive team of lawyers, Backpage has deftly managed to shield itself with an outdated internet freedom law that protects web sites from being sued for content posted by a third party. This law (Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act) was originally intended to protect a budding internet industry from lawsuits based on defamatory posts by its users. However, Section 230 now allows for the proliferation of fake news, scam ads, and is being interpreted by judges to protect websites that facilitate child sex trafficking. And Backpage has some surprising allies. Two internet special interest groups funded by technology companies, The Center for Democracy and Technology and the

Electronic Frontier Foundation, have swooped in to defend Backpage, actively intervening in several cases and doing so persuasively.

That is worth repeating. Via these special interest groups, tech industry giants like Google, Facebook, Microsoft and others are financing the defense of Backpage. This can no longer continue.

Let's be clear. We cannot stand for the idea that the sale of children is acceptable collateral damage for a free and open internet. Especially since companies now have the technological means to stop it.

Last month, Backpage announced that it was shuttering the Escorts section of its website under pressure from the government. However, analysts reported that a majority of these sex ads simply moved to the dating pages of Backpage. The many other sex sites owned and operated by Backpage in the U.S. were not shut down, and the purchase and sale of children continues online today. President Trump recently signaled that he would bring the full weight of the government to help in the fight against human trafficking, including giving law enforcement agencies better tools to go after criminals. U.S. Sen. John Cornyn of Texas is among those working on legislation to do the same. It can't come soon enough. But Congress also has to act by specifically amending Section 230 to make it clear that it is not legal to facilitate child sex trafficking. U.S. Rep. Ann Wagner, R-Missouri, has recently introduced legislation to do just this, and we hope that a

Senate version will be drafted in the coming months. We've started a petition on [Change.org](#) to tell the tech community that it's time to switch sides, and we hope you will join us, too.

Mazzio is an award-winning filmmaker. Her new film, "I AM JANE DOE," which chronicles the battle that several children are waging against Backpage, debuts on iTunes May 12 and with Netflix on May 26. Oz is a cardiothoracic surgeon, Emmy Award-winning host of the Dr. Oz Show, and father of four.