

Best Practices Guide to Prevent Child Exploitation and Trafficking Online



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I. Introduction

In an open letter printed in *The Washington Post* and addressed to the founder of Craigslist, MC wrote:

I was first forced into prostitution when I was 11 years old by a 28-year-old man...All day, me and other girls sat with our laptops, posting pictures and answering ads on [a classified advertising website]...my childhood memories aren't of my family, going to middle school, or dancing at the prom. They are making my own arrangements on [a website] to be sold for sex, and answering as many ads as possible for fear of beatings and ice water baths.

The use of online classified ads to facilitate the exploitation and trafficking of minors is common. Although many people use these types of websites for legitimate commercial purposes, the existence of postings used for exploitation and trafficking purposes cannot be ignored. One CNN investigation went onto Craigslist and found 7,000 sex ads in the adult services section in a single day.¹ Many of the advertisements used words such as “young” and “fresh” to suggest that a girl was a minor or very young and often had pictures attached that made it unclear whether the girl was an adult or a minor.²

Internet companies owning such websites should take responsibility for the exploitation and trafficking activities that occur on their sites. Website operators are not powerless to prevent such activities from taking place. We ask these website owners to act in a socially conscious and responsible manner by making the commitment to help prevent the exploitation and trafficking of children online and following the best practices outlined below.

II. Background: Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking Flourishes Online Via Classifieds

The following stories of AK and MC are both tragic and heartbreaking but by no means uncommon. AK was an 18-year-old girl living in the Midwest when she met a man she thought would become her boyfriend. He was cute, nice, and graciously offered her a ride in his car, which she accepted. To AK's horror, however, this possible boyfriend-to-be turned out to be a pimp on the prowl for new girls to sexually exploit. He held AK against her will in truck stops and cheap motels and forced her to work 10-hour shifts, often making her sleep with as many as 10 different men every night. He moved AK from state to state throughout the Midwest and East Coast and was still able to find an abundance of clients by using Craigslist to advertise her services.

The story of MC follows a similar path as that of AK. MC was 11 years old when a 28-year-old man forced her into prostitution. He posted pictures of her on an online classified advertising website and made approximately \$1,500 a night exploiting MC. The pimps in both cases pocketed all of the money for themselves and controlled everything about the girls' lives. The stories of AK and MC are sadly typical of victims who are trafficked and sold on websites with sex ads.

Police and anti-trafficking advocates stated in an August 2010 CNN report that the Internet has become the “preferred way” to sexually exploit and traffic women and children.³ Pimps and traffickers find it convenient and can remain relatively anonymous by simply posting ads online,

¹ Steve Turnham and Amber Lyon, *Sold on Craigslist: Critics Say Sex and Crackdown Inadequate*, CNN (Aug. 4, 2010), <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/08/03/craigslist.sex.ads/index.html>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

while people who pay for sex have 24-hour access to browse through hundreds of ads from the safety of their homes or hotels.

In an article in *The Daily Beast*, Ken Franzblau, director of the anti-trafficking program at the women's rights NGO Equality Now, stated that Craigslist "actually increased the number of women being put into prostitution...nothing else rivals it."⁴ Franzblau previously directed the anti-trafficking efforts at the New York Division of Criminal Justice Services, where most of the domestic trafficking cases he saw involved Craigslist.⁵ When referring to the shutdown of Craigslist's adult services section, Franzblau stated, "an awful lot of casual purchasers of sex are not going to know where to find it anymore and are just not going to bother."⁶

Shutting down or heavily monitoring websites is not going to eradicate the exploitation and trafficking of children, but it will make it much more difficult for pimps to easily find clients and for clients to find girls. The impact on the number of vulnerable individuals being trafficked would be significant. The public should not be able to buy a trafficked girl forced into prostitution as easily as it can buy a piece of used furniture. Most websites that provide classified advertising services do not intend to provide a convenient and anonymous forum for pimps and traffickers to sexually exploit children. Unfortunately, however, that is often what results when these sites go unmonitored.

In addition, this convenient and easy method to exploit and traffic children has also allowed websites such as Craigslist and BackPage (owned by the Village Voice) that maintain classified sections labeled "erotic services," "adult services," or "therapeutic services" to flourish. Craigslist had generated as much as 30 percent of its income from its adult services section alone.⁷ At the time of this report, Craigslist had officially removed the "adult services" section from its U.S. and international sites, and BackPage had placed specific "personals" sections under review while leaving their "escort services" section active. Although FAIR Fund was encouraged to hear that these steps were taken, exploitative ads continue to flourish and migrate to other sections of these and other online classified advertising websites. Therefore, preventative measures and continued screening are still necessary to combat human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

⁴ Michelle Goldberg, *The Woman Who Beat Craigslist*, *The Daily Beast* (Sept. 27, 2010), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-09-27/craigslist-adult-services-sex-slaves-who-fought-back/full/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Peter Zollman, *Craigslist Revenue, Profits Soar*, aimgroup.com (April 30, 2010), <http://aimgroup.com/blog/2010/04/30/craigslist-revenue-profits-soar/>.

IV. What We Propose: Make A Commitment to Maintain Best Practices

A. A Call to Action

In general, online classified advertising websites provide useful and convenient forums for many who seek to buy, sell and rent items such as furniture, cars and apartments. FAIR Fund does not seek to disrupt the legitimate sales and activities occurring on the sites. We simply hope that online service providers take the initiative to make sure children are not exploited and trafficked on their website. Websites that maintain classified advertising sections have an opportunity to lead the way in creating an open arena for people to connect with one another while also protecting the human rights of its users and those that may be trafficked or exploited via their online services.

FAIR Fund implores classified advertising websites and online communities to take strong and swift action to ensure that their sites are not used to exploit and traffic children. In order to do so, website owners can start by making the commitment to change by taking the steps that we outline below. One website at a time, we hope to make sure that pimps and johns do not have an easily accessible and anonymous means to exploit and traffic children online.

B. Commitments

1. Make the commitment to keep your website free of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Websites relying on its users to flag or report suspicious activity need to add direct measures of their own to prevent the exploitation and trafficking of children on their sites.
2. Remove all sections of the website, in all geographic locations, that have a high potential for facilitating human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Examples include adult services and erotic services sections.
3. Review all listings using not only an automated keyword search but also human beings. Human review should take place BEFORE allowing posts to go live on the site. The automated system should be comprehensive and seek to prevent efforts to circumvent the system's filters.
4. Create a process to ensure that ALL suspicious postings are sent to law enforcement agencies immediately. To accomplish this, website operators should facilitate relationships with law enforcement agencies and establish a point of contact so that suspicious information may be swiftly and effectively conveyed.
5. Educate the public and keep them notified of any known risks. One common and regularly used tactic is for pimps to exploit and sell minors on a website by advertising them as adults. Website operators should also inform users of any recent criminal activity on the site, and educate them on how to protect themselves and report potential abuse or criminal activity. Understandably, a website owner cannot keep 100 percent of criminal activity off its site. As a result, website operators can let the public know what to watch out for and what to avoid. This keeps users safe and increases the safety net for potential trafficking victims, including minors.
6. Continue updating and evolving prevention efforts. As technology changes, new types of criminal activities arise and, therefore, new methods for protecting users are required. It is necessary for website operators to stay abreast of changes and make the necessary adjustments to their prevention efforts.

C. Practical Advice

1. Screening

Actively seek to screen all advertisements before they are visible to the public using a human screener and an automated system to ensure all postings are legitimate. Geebo.com has been screening all postings in this manner since its launch in 2000. All postings on Geebo are placed into a queue and reviewed by staff and an automated filtering system before it is posted for the public to see. If any posts are found to be offensive or suspicious, they are not posted on the website. Instead, the listing and all available information about the person posting the advertisement is sent to law enforcement officials.

2. Changes to Ads

A common tactic of criminals is to post innocuous advertisements so that the post passes the screening process and then to change the content to serve their criminal purpose. In order to prevent this from occurring, websites should not allow users to change posts. Instead, users should be required to remove the old post and create a new one.

3. Educating the Public

Website operators will benefit from educating users of their efforts to protect them. For example, websites can post information about the risks that are inherent in using their websites, but also inform users about the efforts that they are taking to protect them, such as their screening processes.

Case Study: Geebo

Geebo was started with the commitment to provide a safe and socially responsible classifieds experience. As a result, the website never had an “adult services” or “erotica” section, and the website recently decided to shut down their “personals” section. Although they have not had significant problems with illegal activity in their “personals” section, the site wanted to be proactive in taking preventative actions to protect any potential victims of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Geebo.com maintains a high level of safeguards, including both automated and manual screening of all ads before they are posted on the site. In addition, they do not allow users to change ads once they are posted to the site in order to prevent criminals from circumventing their screening process. By taking initiative and using these effective preventative measures, Geebo.com has become a model website that has succeeded in keeping free of trafficking and exploitation. To learn more, visit Geebo.com’s Commitment to Social Responsibility Statement at http://geebo.com/atl.cgi?filter=social_responsibility.html.

In conclusion, FAIR Fund strongly encourages all classified advertising websites to commit to maintaining the best practices outlined above in order to reduce the potential for young people to be trafficked and sexually exploited online. FAIR Fund and our partners hope this guide will foster positive leadership and social responsibility in the area of child trafficking prevention, as we have seen in companies like Geebo. We have seen a growing trend where new online classified advertising and social networking sites are interested in taking leadership to prevent the trafficking and exploitation of children, and FAIR Fund hopes this trend will continue. We call upon all online entities to critically look at their own business practices and commit to leading the way in making the internet safer for vulnerable young people both here in the U.S. and abroad.