

OUT POLITICS AND POLICY

## Senator appears to suggest bipartisan bill would censor transgender content online

The Kids Online Safety Act, aimed at protecting children from harmful online content, has been endorsed by lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, as well as by President Joe Biden.



— Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., at the U.S. Capitol on July 19. Anna Moneymaker / Getty Images file

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**By Matt Lavietes**

A co-sponsor of a bipartisan bill intended to protect children from the dangers of social media and other online content appeared to suggest the measure could be used to steer kids away from seeing transgender content online.

In a [video recently published](#) by the conservative group Family Policy Alliance, Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., said “protecting minor children from the transgender in this culture” should be among the top priorities of conservative lawmakers. While the video was first made public Friday, the interview took place in March at an event held by the Palmetto Family Council, a faith-based organization.



In the same minute-and-a-half video, Blackburn lauded the [Kids Online Safety Act](#), or KOSA, a bipartisan bill introduced in May that would allow parents to sue social media companies and other online platforms if they do not sufficiently shield children under the age of 13 from harmful content on their platforms. The measure was [introduced](#) by Blackburn and Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., and has been endorsed by President Joe Biden.

“This would put a duty of care and responsibility on the social media platforms, and this is where children are being indoctrinated,” she said in the interview. “They’re hearing things at school, and then they’re getting onto YouTube to watch a video and all of a sudden this comes to them, and they’re on Snapchat or they’re on Instagram, and they click on something and the next thing you know, they’re being inundated with it.”

Blackburn added, “Parents need to be watching this, teachers need to be watching and protecting our children, and making certain that they are not exposed to things as they are emotionally, not mature enough to handle.”

In the days since the video was posted, transgender advocates have condemned Blackburn’s comments and urged Democrats to reconsider their support for the bill.

“In an era where few legislative efforts garner cross-party support, the bill’s broad appeal makes it particularly noteworthy,” trans advocate Erin Reed [wrote](#) in her Substack publication, “Erin In the Morning,” on Sunday. “However, KOSA has also emerged as a troubling point of divergence, pitting LGBTQ+ activists against organizations meant to represent their interests, as well as Democratic officials who have otherwise been vocal critics of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.”

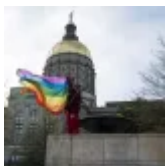
Reed added that this “divide highlights the potential for a serious misstep by those who otherwise support transgender people and could result in significant harm for the community should it pass.”

Later that same day, however, Blackburn’s legislative director, Jamie Susskind, pushed back on the notion that the bill would censor transgender content online and appeared to suggest that Blackburn misspoke.

In response to a Los Angeles Blade article about Blackburn’s remarks titled “U.S. Senator: ‘Kids Online Safety Act’ will target trans content,” Susskind [wrote](#) on X, formerly known as Twitter, “This is false. These are two separate issues being taken out of context. KOSA will not – nor was it designed to – target or censor any individual or community.”

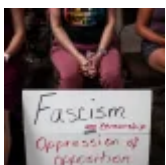
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In a phone call on Tuesday, a spokesperson for Blackburn pointed NBC News to Susskind’s tweet.

When asked about Blackburn’s remarks and the subsequent response from transgender advocates, the bill’s lead Democratic sponsor, Sen. Blumenthal, said in an emailed statement on Tuesday that the Kids Online Safety Act “does not target or censor anyone, including members of the LGBTQ community.”

“Striking the right balance between supporting safe online spaces and protecting against toxic content targeting LGBTQ youth is very important to us, which is why my staff and I had extensive and collaborative conversations with stakeholders, including LGBTQ groups, to further clarify the legislative text so that it better reflects the intent of the bill,” Blumenthal said. “Those changes are reflected in the reintroduced version of the bill.”

Biden [expressed his support](#) for the bill in remarks to reporters in July, saying, “We’ve got to hold these platforms accountable for the national experiment they’re conducting on our children for profit.”

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Social media companies have largely come out in opposition to the Kids Online Safety Act and several other pieces of proposed legislation recently introduced in Congress to regulate their platforms. 



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