



March 12, 2024

House Business and Utilities Subcommittee
Attn: Jackson Stubblefield, Research Analyst
425 5th Ave. N
528 Cordell Hull Bldg.
Nashville, TN 37243

RE: HB 682 - "AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 4; Title 47 and Title 65, relative to social media." (Oppose)

Dear Chair Boyd and Members of the House Business and Utilities Subcommittee:

CCIA is an international, not-for-profit trade association representing a broad cross-section of communications and technology firms.¹ Proposed regulations on the interstate provision of digital services can have a significant impact on CCIA members. Recent sessions have seen an increasing volume of state legislation related to the regulation of what digital services host and how they host it. CCIA recognizes that policymakers are appropriately interested in the digital services that make a growing contribution to the U.S. economy. Bills focused on the content of internet speech, however, require study, because they may raise constitutional concerns,² conflict with federal law, and risk impeding digital services companies in their efforts to restrict inappropriate or harmful content on their platforms.

Tennessee cannot and should not attempt to force private online businesses to publish dangerous or otherwise objectionable content.

HB 682 inaccurately asserts that some social media platforms are “common carriers,” which implies they are prohibited from restricting problematic but legal content. However, these companies operate very differently from traditional common carriers, such as public transit or telephone cable providers. Their services are not common, as they do not serve the entire public, and they do not publish all content equally. Most services explicitly refuse service to individuals and organizations specially designated by governments or intergovernmental organizations as criminals or terrorists. Several other scenarios may impact changes to user access, such as limits for users under 13 years of age according to COPPA, restricting those who have violated established community terms of use, preserving the safety of other users, and ceasing to provide service in certain jurisdictions where meeting local regulatory requirements is not practicable.

Just as these services do not serve all users, they do not publish all content. In addition to prohibiting illegal content as required by relevant state and federal laws, many digital services remove content that is dangerous, though not inherently illegal. This includes, for example, content that exhorts users to self-harm or encourages young people to engage in dangerous or destructive behavior. Thus, while it is not explicitly illegal to engage in cyberbullying, or to evangelize the Chinese Communist Party, many digital services nevertheless act on such content to uphold commitments to their user communities to combat dangerous or abhorrent categories of content or behavior.

¹ For over 50 years, CCIA has promoted open markets, open systems, and open networks. CCIA members employ more than 1.6 million workers, invest more than \$100 billion in research and development, and contribute trillions of dollars in productivity to the global economy. A list of CCIA members is available at <https://www.ccianet.org/members>.

² Eric Goldman, *The Constitutionality of Mandating Editorial Transparency*, 73 *Hastings L.J.* 1203 (2022), https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3985&context=hastings_law_journal.

Therefore, if social media services are compelled to treat all user-generated material with indifference as if they were common carriers, their platforms could become saturated with inappropriate and potentially dangerous content and behavior.³ Consumers would be exposed to foreign disinformation, communist propaganda, and anti-American extremism, all of which are not inherently unlawful and would appear to constitute a “viewpoint” or “political ideology” under HB 682.

Courts have also indicated that social media companies are not common carriers.⁴ The Legislature cannot circumvent the First Amendment by foisting upon an unwilling company a legal status it does not have.⁵

Businesses operating online depend on clear regulatory certainty across jurisdictions nationwide.

Existing U.S. law provides websites and online businesses with legal and regulatory certainty that they will not be held liable for third-party content and conduct. By limiting the liability of digital services for misconduct by third-party users, U.S. law has created a robust internet ecosystem where commerce, innovation, and free expression thrive — all while enabling providers to take creative and aggressive steps to fight online abuse. Ambiguous and inconsistent regulation at the state level would undermine this business certainty and deter new entrants, harming competition and consumers.

Research suggests that removing such regulatory certainty could have significant economic impacts.

The Bureau of Economic Analysis of the U.S. Commerce Department estimated that the digital economy built on this regulatory certainty “accounted for \$3.70 trillion of gross output, \$2.41 trillion of value added (translating to 10.3 percent of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP)), \$1.24 trillion of compensation, and 8.0 million jobs.”⁶ Introducing a state patchwork of differing and potentially conflicting regulatory requirements would result in legal uncertainty, create unprecedented economic distortions, and jeopardize the tools used by the vast majority of Americans to speak and express themselves online.

Survey research also demonstrates that changing regulations to remove intermediary protections would have a negative effect on venture capital investment.⁷ Similarly, economic research found that such investment in cloud computing firms increased significantly in the U.S. relative to the European Union after a court decision involving intermediary liability.⁸

³ Rob Arthur, *We Analyzed More than 1 Million Comments on 4chan. Hate Speech There Has Spiked by 40% since 2015.*, VICE, (July 10, 2019), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d3nbzy/we-analyzed-more-than-1-million-comments-on-4chan-hate-speech-there-has-spiked-by-40-since-2015>.

⁴ See *NetChoice LLC & CCIA v. Paxton*, 573 F. Supp. 3d 1092, 1107 n.3 (W.D. Tex. 2021).

⁵ See *Manhattan Cmty. Access Corp. v. Halleck*, 139 S. Ct. 1921, 1932 (2019) (“certain private entities have rights to exercise editorial control over speech and speakers on their properties or platforms”). In any event, common carriers still retain First Amendment interests. See *PG&E v. Pub. Utils. Comm’n of Cal.*, 475 U.S. 1, 12, 20-21 (1986).

⁶ Tina Highfill & Christopher Surfield, *New and Revised Statistics of the U.S. Digital Economy, 2005–2021*, Bureau of Economic Analysis of the U.S. Department of Commerce, <https://www.bea.gov/system/files/2022-11/new-and-revised-statistics-of-the-us-digital-economy-2005-2021.pdf>.

⁷ Booz & Company, *The Impact of U.S. Internet Copyright Regulations on Early Stage Investment: A Quantitative Study* (2011), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5481bc79e4b01c4bf3ceed80/t/54877560e4b0716e0e088c54/1418163552585/Impact-US-Internet-Copyright-Regulations-Early-Stage-Investment.pdf>.

⁸ Compare Josh Lerner, *The Impact of Copyright Policy Changes on Venture Capital Investment in Cloud Computing Companies* (Analysis Group 2011), <https://www.analysisgroup.com/globalassets/content/insights/publishing/impact-copyright-policy-changes-venture-capital-investment-cloud-computing-companies.pdf>; with Josh Lerner, *The Impact of Copyright Policy Changes in France and Germany on Venture Capital Investment in Cloud Computing Companies* (Analysis Group 2012), <https://www.ccianet.org/wp-content/uploads/library/eu%20cloud%20computing%20white%20paper.pdf>.



Investors in digital intermediaries and their business users could see significant losses, which would be felt widely across the American population. Digital intermediaries account for at least one-fifth, and potentially more than a quarter, of the S&P 500 by index weighting.⁹ Thus, a major reduction in the value of their securities would significantly harm passive investors’ low-cost index funds that track the S&P 500 Index, commonly a top investment in 401(k) plans and personal investments for ordinary Americans. According to Morningstar, retail investors held \$8.53 trillion in index funds that seek to replicate market indicators like the S&P 500 Index or related measures with similarly large digital intermediary representation.¹⁰ Likewise, American pension plans are heavily invested in digital intermediaries: the average government employee pension plan has 4.3 of the 5 leading digital intermediaries in its top 10 holdings.¹¹

The private right of action would result in the proliferation of frivolous lawsuits.

HB 682 permits users to bring legal action against companies that have been accused of violating new regulations. By creating a new private right of action, the measure would open the doors of Tennessee's courthouses to plaintiffs advancing frivolous claims with little evidence of actual injury. As lawsuits prove extremely costly and time-intensive, it is foreseeable that these costs would be passed on to individual users and advertisers in Tennessee, disproportionately impacting smaller businesses and startups across the state.¹²

Compelled speech requirements for online businesses are currently being litigated in multiple jurisdictions, including most recently before the U.S. Supreme Court.

*NetChoice & CCIA v. Moody*¹³ and *NetChoice & CCIA v. Paxton*,¹⁴ two cases stemming from state content moderation laws requiring online businesses to host all content on their platforms regardless of whether that content violates their terms of service, were just heard by the U.S. Supreme Court due to First Amendment concerns. A decision is expected to be announced before 2025. CCIA recommends that lawmakers permit this issue to be more fully examined by the judiciary before burdening businesses with legislation that risks being invalidated and passing on expensive litigation costs to taxpayers.

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We appreciate your consideration of these comments and stand ready to provide additional information as the legislature considers proposals related to technology policy.

Sincerely,

Khara Boender
State Policy Director
Computer & Communications Industry Association

⁹ Nathan Reiff, *The Top 25 Stocks in the S&P 500*, Investopedia (Oct. 11, 2022), <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/08/find-stocks-in-sp500.asp>.

¹⁰ Allan Sloan, *‘The democratization of investing’: Index funds officially overtake active managers*, Yahoo! Finance (May 22, 2022), <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/index-fund-assets-exceed-active-fund-assets-120639243.html>.

¹¹ Trevor Wagener, *The Cost of Tech Regulatory Bills to State and Local Pension Plans – State By State Aggregates*, CCIA Research Center (May 20, 2022), <https://research.ccianet.org/stats/cost-of-tech-regulation-bills-state-map/>.

¹² Trevor Wagener, *State Regulation of Content Moderation Would Create Enormous Legal Costs for Platforms*, Broadband Breakfast (Mar. 23, 2021), <https://broadbandbreakfast.com/2021/03/trevor-wagener-state-regulation-of-content-moderation-would-create-enormous-legal-costs-for-platforms>.

¹³ Computer & Communications Industry Association, *NetChoice & CCIA v. Moody*, <https://ccianet.org/litigation/netchoice-ccia-v-moody/>.

¹⁴ Computer & Communications Industry Association, *NetChoice & CCIA v. Paxton*, <https://ccianet.org/litigation/netchoice-ccia-v-paxton/>.