

Article

Challenging Anti-Porn Policy: Digital Sex Worker Journalism

Lauren Robinson Levitt 

XCITE Center for Teaching and Learning, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521, USA; laurenl@ucr.edu

Abstract

Through textual analysis of 15 English-language articles by seven predominantly U.S.-based sex worker journalists published between 2014 and 2025 across 11 online platforms, this article examines how sex worker journalists aim to influence public opinion around anti-porn policy. Sex workers report on legislation such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), age-verification laws, the Stop Internet Sexual Exploitation Act (SISEA), and the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act, maintaining that these laws cause harm to sex workers. In the process, they challenge sex work stigma perpetuated by the mainstream media and stake alternative validity claims. They also construct sex worker expertise based on their lived experience in the sex trades through new modes of address and by citing sex workers alongside other progressive organizers. This, furthermore, supports coalition building between the sex workers' rights movement and other movements for social justice.

Keywords: sex work; online journalism; policy; pornography; Kids Online Safety Act; age-verification laws; Stop Internet Sexual Exploitation Act; Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act; United States; sex workers' rights

1. Introduction

The landscape of 21st-century journalism has been defined by a move toward “participatory” or “grassroots” structures, sometimes called “citizen journalism,” wherein digital tools empower marginalized groups to reclaim their own narratives [1–3]. Previous research has shown how women, LGBTQ folks, and Black Americans have used the internet to extend their communicative reach [4–8]. By expanding the public sphere, these technological shifts have also enabled sex workers to challenge the pervasive, harmful tropes often found in mainstream news coverage [9]. Within this context, sex worker digital media, including journalism, zines, podcasting, and social media, serve as a critical counterpublic sphere from which sex workers can construct group identities and organize political resistance [9,10].

Today, sex workers face an aggressive wave of anti-porn policy purportedly addressing online safety. Under the guise of protection, lawmakers advocate for legislative measures such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), state-level age-verification mandates, the Stop Internet Sexual Exploitation Act (SISEA), and the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act. However, sex worker journalists argue that these laws primarily serve to further marginalize their community, disrupt their financial stability, and censor their digital presence. By covering such legislation in their reporting, sex worker journalists highlight the discrepancy between legislative intent and the material harm caused to those working in the sex industry. This article examines how these practitioners use digital journalism to influence public opinion and contest dominant representations of sex work in the news media. By doing so, online journalists cultivate sex worker expertise through



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alternative modes of address and citational practice, strengthening coalitions between movements for sex workers' rights and other social justice issues (see also [9]).

1.1. Online Sex Work

Sex work is generally defined as exchanging erotic labor for anything of value, such as money, goods or services. It is an umbrella category used by organizers for the purpose of coalition building that comprises many sectors of the sex industry including, but not limited to, street-based sex work, brothel work, escorting, sugaring, erotic massage, erotic dancing, BDSM work, porn work, webcamming, and phone sex work. However, because sex workers often move across multiple sectors of the sex industry, such as a webcammer who also produces OnlyFans content and occasionally sees clients in person, sex work can also be conceived of as a continuum of labor. Sex work can be described as either “in-person,” or “online.” In-person sex workers interact with clients face-to-face, whereas online sex workers interact with clients through digital platforms.

Sanders et al. refer to online sex work such as webcamming, instant message, phone sex chat, and pornographic content creation as “technology-mediated indirect” internet-based sex work [11] (p. 92). They note that, while the internet has enabled new safety strategies for sex workers, it also poses new risks such as online harassment, non-payment, verbal abuse, and privacy concerns (see also [12]). For example, nearly half of the U.K.-based webcammers/phone sex operators they surveyed “stated that information they had put online had been used without their consent” including instances of doxing and outing [11] (p. 110).

Scholars have investigated various forms of online sex work including webcamming [12–14] and content creation [15]. In particular, scholars have written about OnlyFans, a direct-to-consumer platform for (adult) content creators [16,17]. The anti-pornography policy discussed in this article most directly impacts such online sex workers, as opposed porn performers to with studio contracts.

1.2. Mainstream Media and the Construction of Stigma

A significant body of scholarship has documented the role of legacy media in perpetuating stigmas that actively harm sex workers. Rather than providing nuanced coverage, mainstream news outlets in the United States and abroad frequently rely on a narrow set of “myths” that frame sex workers through the lenses of criminality, moral contagion, and disease. As U.S. journalist and former dancer and escort Melissa Gira Grant highlights in *Playing the Whore*, these tendencies often reduce the sex worker to a caricature of an agentless victim, a street-based sex worker defined entirely by her job [18].

The media's tendency to conflate consensual sex work with human trafficking exacerbates this reductionist framing. Sociologist Ronald Weitzer notes that news discourse frequently prioritizes themes of “victimization, nuisances, street prostitution, trafficking, arrests, or raids on prostitution ‘rings’ or businesses” [19] (p. 721). Nor are these patterns localized to the United States. Discursive, thematic, and content analyses of sex work in the news media in New Zealand and Canada have identified recurring tropes that position sex work as a social problem or source of physical and moral contagion.

In New Zealand, for example, in their discursive analysis of newspaper articles, Panteá Farvid and Lauren Glass reveal that people selling sex were always represented as women and that opponents of decriminalization positioned sex work as a site of moral and physical contagion and as exploitation. Additionally, children who sold sex were cast as victims engaged in survival sex, while adult women were almost always depicted as street-based sex workers and were portrayed as a public nuisance and (deserving) victims of violence [20]. Likewise, Lisa Fitzgerald and Gillian Abel conduct a content analysis of

print media reporting on the Prostitution Reform Act, which decriminalized prostitution, and they find that some articles “described sex work as a ‘threat to dominant morality’ and ‘a public nuisance’ and sex workers as ‘victims,’” even though the majority of the coverage was neutral [21] (p. 201). Lastly, Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith discovers stereotypes such as “visual markers of sex work associated with street-based sex workers,” sex work as a vector of disease and a moral failing, a focus on sexual labor, and “an assumption that violence is a natural part of [sex work],” especially from clients, in their critical discourse analysis of sex work after decriminalization [22] (p. 56).

In Canada, Erin Gibbs Van Brunschot et al. find nuisance, child abuse, violence, and non-Western prostitution as primary themes in their content analysis of news media [23], and Strega et al. identify vermin-victim discourse and risky lifestyle discourse as the two main discourses about street-based sex workers in their critical discourse analysis of disappeared and murdered women in newspaper coverage [24]. Similarly, Helga Kristín Hallgrímsdóttir et al. uncover narratives of sex workers as vectors of moral contagion and disease, sex workers as criminals, sex workers as victims, sex work as a social problem, a focus on street-based sex work, and the invisibility of male sex workers in their thematic analyses of sex work in the news media [25,26].

However, scholarship on sex work in non-Western and/or non-Anglophone news media environments, like those in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, offers a more nuanced picture. For instance, in their corpus linguistic and critical discourse analysis of sex work in the South African news media, Sally Hunt and Beatrice Hubbard find that, although sex workers are often represented as victims of violence, vectors of disease, sources of moral contagion, and overwhelmingly women, some articles also advocate for the decriminalization of sex work as a human rights issue [27]. In their framing analysis of prostitution in Turkish newspapers, Mine Özasçılar and Neylan Ziyalar find themes of foreign prostitutes, prostitutes as vectors of disease (particularly HIV), child prostitutes as victims, and prostitution as associated with organized crime, but they also find that prostitutes are directly quoted in about 10% of their sample [28]. In his corpus-assisted discourse analysis of male sex workers in Thai newspapers, Nattawaj Kijratanakoson finds that the media depict male sex workers as non-threatening [29]. Finally, in her Foucauldian discourse analysis of news articles about sex workers in Cuba, Amalia Lucía Cabezas finds that sex workers are portrayed as immoral, more in line with Western, Anglophone contexts [30].

Such routine misrepresentation creates a hostile discursive environment where sex workers are systematically excluded from the policies that govern their lives. This is especially important because media narratives are the only way that many people *knowingly* encounter sex workers, and journalists frequently use negative sex work stereotypes as resonant frames [9,21,22,25,26,31,32]. However, news media-driven stigma has also served as a catalyst for the emergence of a sex worker counterpublic. By leveraging digital platforms, sex workers have moved beyond being the *subjects* of harmful news cycles to becoming the *authors* of their own reporting. This shift allows sex workers to articulate alternative validity claims that directly challenge harmful legislation supported by mainstream media narratives.

1.3. Grassroots Journalism and Networked (Counter)publics

News consumption has undergone a fundamental shift since the late 20th century, largely driven by what José van Dijck et al. call the “unbundling” and “rebundling” of journalistic content through online platforms [33]. This process has moved media away from traditional, centralized distribution toward an environment defined by the increasing personalization of news. Although van Dijck et al. see this as a negative trend

undermining journalistic independence and news trustworthiness, Christian Fuchs and Klaus Unterberger see a positive role for the internet in public life [34]. For instance, in response to the demand for more specialized content, the early 21st century has seen a significant expansion in the role of the audience within the journalistic process.

Central to this transformation is the emergence of “participatory journalism,” a term coined by researchers Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis to describe citizens taking an active role in the “collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating” of news [2] (p. 9). By performing these tasks, non-professional reporters provide the “independent, reliable, and wide-ranging information” that is essential for a healthy democracy (Ibid). Similarly, journalist Dan Gillmor identifies this phenomenon as “grassroots journalism,” arguing that the internet has permanently lowered the barriers for audience involvement. Moreover, Gilmore predicts that the democratization of reporting will enhance public participation in both policy deliberation and political discourse [1].

Further characterizing this shift, Seungahn Nah and Deborah S. Chung frame citizen-led reporting as a vital form of civic engagement [3]. They contend that digital journalism serves as a bridge between the public sphere and civil society, stimulating the “conversation of democracy” (p. 4). Collectively, these scholars suggest that grassroots journalism not only increases the diversity of perspectives available to the public but also effectively erodes the traditional boundaries between amateur and professional news production. In the context of this study, “grassroots journalism” serves as the most effective framework for understanding the sex worker counterpublic sphere as a link between sex workers’ digital news practices and movements for social justice.

The concept of the “counterpublic” serves as a critical intervention in traditional democratic theory, particularly the Habermasian ideal of a singular, universal public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, “mediates between the state and society” and is the site where public opinion is formed [35] (p. 50). It is defined by rational discourse and access to all citizens, but since the late 18th century the public sphere has been weakened by the expansion of capitalism and the emergence of the welfare state, Habermas claims (p. 54).

As Nancy Fraser argues, however, the “bourgeois” or “liberal” public sphere was never truly inclusive. Instead, it functioned by denying social inequalities that remained present in practice [36]. In response to their systematic exclusion from these dominant arenas, marginalized groups like women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks constructed what Fraser terms “subaltern counterpublics.” These are parallel discursive spaces where members of subordinated groups can articulate counter-discourses formulating oppositional interpretations of their identities and needs. For example, Rita Felski examines the feminist counterpublic sphere [37], while Michael Warner investigates the queer counterpublic sphere [38] and Allissa Richardson the Black counterpublic sphere [4]. For sex workers, this counterpublic function is vital. It provides a space to build community, challenge stigma, and contest harmful legislation. Importantly, counterpublics also allow marginalized groups to develop new modes of address and alternative discourse norms, and sex worker journalists do this through their citational practices, as well as drawing on their lived experience.

In the 21st century, counterpublics have been radically transformed by digital connectivity, evolving into what scholars describe as networked counterpublics. According to danah boyd, social network sites are “networked publics,” or “publics that are structured through networked technologies” [39] (n.p.), and boyd and Alice Marwick maintain that teens create counterpublics on social networking sites to connect with one another and contest adult norms and authority [40]. Unlike traditional counterpublics that may have relied on physical gatherings or niche print media, networked counterpublics leverage

the affordances of social media and digital platforms to overcome geographical and social isolation. For example, Sarah J. Jackson et al. and Jackson and Brook Foucault Welles demonstrate how marginalized groups including women, LGBTQ folks, and Black Americans use digital tools to subvert dominant narratives and bring their perspectives into the mainstream view [5–8]. Additionally, Richardson shows how Black activists engage in grassroots journalism using digital technology to push back against news myths [4].

These networked counterpublics are not merely digital versions of old structures. They are characterized by the rapid circulation of information transcending platform boundaries. This connectivity allows sex worker journalists to mobilize quickly against legislative threats, turning private community knowledge into public political pressure. By operating through these networked structures, sex worker journalists challenge the gatekeeping power of traditional media and ensure that the lived experiences of sex workers, rather than stigmatizing tropes, inform contemporary policy debate.

2. Materials and Methods

In the spirit of standpoint feminism, I first offer a statement of my positionality [41,42]. I am white, middle-class, and feminine presenting. As part of the research for my forthcoming book on sex workers' networks of care, I conducted participant observation with the Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles, a sex worker activist organization, and I am currently on their advisory board. I stand with the communities I study in their commitment to the destigmatization and decriminalization of sex work, and I act as a sex worker advocate at public and academic events and in the media [43]. My positionality structurally shaped every stage of the research design, and as Patricia Hill Collins indicates, one's positionality may prove an analytical resource [44]. However, my interpretive horizon framing sex worker journalists as agents of resistance may have foreclosed alternative readings of the articles analyzed identifying tensions, contradictions, or limitations within sex worker journalism.

To examine how sex workers resist anti-porn policy through their digital journalism, I conducted in-depth textual analysis of 15 English-language articles about anti-porn policy by seven predominantly U.S.-based sex worker journalists published between 2014 and 2025 across 11 online platforms (Appendix A). This research was IRB exempt because it did not involve human subjects. Because there is no way to search specifically for sex worker journalists in news databases, and because there is no comprehensive list of sex worker journalists, I conducted a purposeful sample. I found many of these articles through the personal websites and Muck Rack profiles of former and current self-identified sex worker journalists I was familiar with through my involvement in sex worker advocacy in the United States.

Because of this, the articles I identified were predominantly written by U.S. sex workers for an imagined U.S. audience, although one article was written by a sex worker in the United Kingdom, a major limitation of this research. It excluded the voices of sex worker journalists from other countries and in languages other than English, as well as sex worker journalists that fell outside of my relatively privileged organizing networks. However, my aim was not generalization but the analysis of a specific form of counterpublic knowledge production.

I excluded articles that were self-published, for example in a blog or on a personal Medium account, though I included articles appearing in an edited publication on Medium. From these initial articles, I located additional articles by sex worker journalists through the suggested articles function of many news sites and through hyperlinks in the articles themselves. In total, I collected 104 English-language articles by sex worker journalists on a topic related to sex work.

For the sake of length, I first removed 26 articles that were cultural reviews, and I read the remaining 78. Of these, I identified 36 articles that discussed sex work and online platforms in relation to regulation, criminalization, and labor rights, including op-eds, personal essays, and reporting on politics and culture. To familiarize myself with the contents of each article, I first read the articles and wrote detailed summaries of each, making note of common themes that emerged as well as relevant quotes.

Next, I arranged these summaries into nine categories: the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Stop Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), the Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies (EARN IT) Act, anti-porn policy, discrimination (in banking, social media, and immigration), the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), age-verification, the Stop Internet Sexual Exploitation Act (SISEA), the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act, labor rights, and surveillance. Even though some articles related to more than one category, I organized them according to the article's primary focus and made note of any connections between categories. This preliminary, inductive analysis revealed that sex worker journalists advocated against policy further criminalizing sex work and undermining the labor rights of sex workers including SESTA/FOSTA, the EARN IT Act, and anti-pornography policy. I then engaged in a close reading of the 15 articles relating to anti-pornography policy, paying particular attention to the author's rhetorical strategies and sources quoted.

Finally, I used generative AI to help me rewrite the introduction and literature review sections of this article based on a recent article, which focuses on sex worker journalism about SESTA/FOSTA and EARN IT rather than anti-porn policy [9]. I asked Google Gemini to rewrite the introduction to this article so that it was not self-plagiarizing. It gave me three options, and I asked it to expand on one of them. Next, I gave Gemini literature reviews on sex work in the media and grassroots journalism and counterpublic spheres and asked it to rewrite them. I then asked Gemini to iterate on its literature review about grassroots journalism and counterpublic spheres by removing references to the literature review on sex work in the media. It did not do this adequately, so I rephrased my prompt. Then, I asked it to write paragraphs about the counterpublic spheres of marginalized groups and networked counterpublics. Lastly, I edited parts of these sections together, adding details and citations where necessary and revising any inaccuracies. I also heavily edited this section for style.

Because I, myself, am an advocate rather than a sex worker journalist, I additionally subjected my findings to a member checking process. I shared an early draft of the article with a sex worker writing group, and I received feedback on both the introduction and literature review as well as the findings. Then, I asked sex worker journalist Laura LeMoon, whose work I discuss, to review a draft of the article after it was peer-reviewed. These community members were able to confirm that my readings reflect their intentions and experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

Sex worker online journalists seek to influence public opinion related to public and private sector anti-porn policy, including social media, banking, and immigration discrimination against porn performers. For example, in an article for the progressive U.S. news magazine *The New Republic* comparing remote work to webcam modeling, staff writer Melissa Gira Grant posits that subscription content platform OnlyFans "only exists because social media platforms like Instagram routinely suppress sex workers' accounts and original content and because payment processors like PayPal have a history of closing sex workers' accounts" [45] (n.p.). This allows OnlyFans to "charge sex workers excluded elsewhere a premium for their services," even though performers remain reliant

on payment processors/platforms for their income (Ibid). Grant thereby argues that the exploitation engendered by OnlyFans' monopoly in the direct-to-consumer pornography market is enabled by the discrimination against sex workers on social media and online payment platforms.

Additionally, in an article on the U.S. news website *The Daily Beast* criticizing comedian Bill Maher for making fun of sex workers after OnlyFans briefly decided to ban pornography, former sex worker and trafficking victim Laura LeMoon explains that OnlyFans' decision resulted from the conflation of sex work and sex trafficking common in the U.S. anti-trafficking movement [46]. According to LeMoon, this conflation also contributed to the passage of SESTA/FOSTA, which shut down advertising sites and other resources sex workers used to screen clients and keep each other safe, and it influences private corporations like Mastercard and Facebook, "each of which are deeply involved in making sex work more challenging and dangerous" by discriminating against sex workers (n.p.). In this article, LeMoon draws on her experience as both a sex worker and a sex trafficking survivor to contest the conflation of sex work with trafficking, which is also common in mainstream media about sex work [18,19,26]. LeMoon occupies a complex identity that sits at the center of a contested scholarly debate. While many feminists view all sex work as inherently exploitative, others support the rights and agency of people who sell or trade erotic labor. By positioning herself as both a sex worker and a trafficking survivor, LeMoon reveals that these are distinct yet not mutually exclusive categories, and that advocating for sex workers does not mean advocating against trafficking victims. Additionally, LeMoon asserts her expertise on both anti-trafficking and social media and banking discrimination against sex workers based on her lived experience in the sex trade, a common discursive feature of the sex worker counterpublic sphere blending the public and the private. This is especially important because the expertise of sex workers is routinely denied in the mainstream media, as elsewhere.

Similarly, in an article for U.S. men's magazine *MEL*, former BDSM worker and porn performer Tina Horn describes how porn performers create carefully curated personas to connect with fans and earn extra money on social media, indicating why shadowbanning (making a users' account or posts invisible without notifying them) and account closure are so harmful [47]. Furthermore, in an article for the Canadian-American news and culture magazine *Vice*, Horn explains how the banking industry discriminates against sex workers [48]. According to Horn, the Department of Justice's Operation Choke Point allegedly put pressure on banks to close the accounts of porn performers, making it difficult for them to pay taxes or sign leases. Moreover, Paypal shuts down the accounts of people assumed to be sex workers and keeps their money, and crowdfunding platforms that use the credit card processor WePay have their accounts closed. Horn contends that such discrimination against sex workers is ordinary, and it is more common for sex workers who are more stigmatized, such as criminalized sex workers, trans sex workers, sex workers of color, and poor sex workers. In the article on shadowbanning, Horn directly quotes porn performers Asa Akira, Nenetl Avril, and Lorelei Lee [47], and in the article on banking discrimination, she quotes performers Lee, Siouxsie Q, Maggie Mayhem, and Shakti, as well as sex worker organizer Kate D'Adamo [48]. In addition to affirming the expertise of these porn performers and organizers on social media and banking discrimination against sex workers, Horn draws on her own experience as a sex worker in the article on banking discrimination, positioning herself as an expert on this topic [48].

Finally, in an article for *Rewire News*—a non-profit U.S. news site dedicated to reproductive and sexual health, rights, and justice—dancer and former porn performer Reese Piper interviews Ruby, an undocumented stripper in South Florida. Ruby discloses that her club shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but she is hesitant to try online

sex work because she is afraid that she will be denied a green card because of it [49]. As Piper writes, “Many strippers have migrated to online sex work, but this type of visibility puts undocumented and migrant sex workers at a higher risk of being deported, getting their green card application denied, or being refused entry into the United States” (n.p.). By interviewing Ruby and sharing her story, Piper indicates the impact that immigration discrimination against sex workers, including porn performers, has on real people, contributing to sex worker storytelling networks and strengthening connections between sex worker and migrant rights movements [3]. Piper furthermore situates herself as an authority on immigration discrimination because of her experience as both a dancer and a porn performer.

Sex worker journalists also advocate against anti-porn legislation including KOSA, state-level age verification laws, SISEA, and the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act. These laws are part of a bipartisan “war on porn” led by the far right in concert with anti-prostitution advocates, the same advocates who pressed for SESTA/FOSTA. Grant addresses this attack on pornography in an article for *The New Republic* about Project 2025, the right-wing plan for a second Trump presidency, explaining that it involves “redefining anything concerning sexuality and gender that they say is harmful to children as pornography” [50] (n.p.). Grant discloses that, as part of their attempt to outlaw porn, the right propose shutting down telecommunications and technology companies that enable the distribution of pornography. She also claims that Project 2025’s “anti-pornography rhetoric” is part of the anti-gender movement, “a transnational movement, fueling and also fueled by the reassertion of the patriarchal order, a return to normative sex and gender roles, and of ordering the world by sex and gender hierarchies,” linking sex workers’ rights to movements for gender justice (Ibid). By challenging Project 2025’s attempt to eradicate pornography on the internet, Grant presents herself as an expert on gender and sexuality as well as communication technology.

3.1. KOSA

In 2022, Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal along with Tennessee Senator Marsha Blackburn introduced KOSA to Congress. KOSA allegedly aims to protect children, in this case from harmful material on social media, but critics argue that it is overly broad and could lead to censorship of content important to marginalized groups such as information on abortion and LGBTQ issues [51]. Additionally, KOSA could harm sex workers by censoring sexual content on the internet, including pornography, and these impacts could extend internationally to anyone using a platform operating in the United States.

When KOSA passed the Senate Commerce Committee, Grant published an article in *The New Republic* criticizing Democrats for supporting the bill despite its potential to be used for conservative ends [52]. In this article, Grant insists that, although supporters of the bill say that it will protect children from online harms, “KOSA is ultimately concerned with policing the content and conduct of internet users, not with addressing the relatively unaccountable power of the tech platforms themselves” (n.p.). She elaborates:

“As proposed, KOSA would require online platforms to ‘take reasonable measures’ to ‘prevent and mitigate’ harms to minors such as ‘anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and suicidal behaviors,’ along with ‘patterns of use that indicate or encourage addiction-like behaviors’ and ‘physical violence, online bullying, and harassment of the minor.’ State attorneys general would be the arbiters of alleged failures to ‘prevent and mitigate’ such harms, with the power to impose penalties on platforms. Such actions could be initiated by the attorneys general themselves, if they feel that any resident of their state is ‘threatened or adversely affected by the engagement of any person in a practice that violates this Act.’” (Ibid)

Grant mentions that groups opposing the bill like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the American Library Association, digital rights organization the Electronic Frontier Foundation, LGBTQ advocacy organization GLAAD, and the National Center for Transgender Equality warn that the bill could harm vulnerable youth by denying them access to information, and she directly quotes an organizer from U.S. internet advocacy group Fight for the Future. Although she does not mention sex work or pornography in this article, by highlighting these groups' opposition to KOSA, Grant reinforces alliances between the sex workers', digital, and LGBTQ rights movements, as well as other progressive organizations. She also asserts her own authority on internet technology and censorship.

3.2. Age-Verification Laws

In addition to federal anti-porn legislation like KOSA, many states have enacted age-verification laws requiring that users verify their age, for example, by uploading a government issued ID, before accessing sexual content. Like KOSA, these laws are predicated on "protecting children from harm." Currently, 27 U.S. States have enacted age-verification laws [53], and in 2025, the Supreme Court upheld an age verification law in Texas [54]. Three online articles by sex worker journalists highlight the negative consequences of age-verification laws, particularly for sex workers.

In a historical article for independent U.S. news site *CounterPunch*, former escort Kaytlin Bailey compares concerns about pornography on the internet to earlier moral panics about technology and pornography "in the name of 'protecting' children and women, who are considered child-like in their supposed inability to handle explicit content or exposure to vice" [54] (n.p.). She thereby contests the construction of sex work as moral contagion common in the mainstream media [18,20–22,25,26]. Bailey describes how age-verification laws seek to "eradicate [porn] entirely," in addition to removing sexual content such as sex education resources from the internet [55] (n.p.). Combined with stigma and banking discrimination, she argues, age-verification laws have led to human rights violations against porn performers; they have "lost jobs, been kicked out of school, lost custody of their children, had their money seized, and have been permanently banned from accessing financial services and technology platforms" (Ibid). In this way, Bailey connects sex work to human rights issues like education, reproduction, and financial independence, in addition to asserting her expertise in both technology and human rights.

Two articles by historian and former dancer Sascha Cohen similarly denounce age-verification legislation. In an article for independent U.S. news magazine *The Nation*, Cohen maintains that age-verification bills will increase state surveillance and unconstitutionally censor legal content under the guise of protecting children from online pornography [56]. She criticizes journalists like Nicholas (Nick) Kristof for publishing articles that legitimize efforts by conservative U.S. religious groups Exodus Cry and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation to protect women and children by censoring pornography. Cohen accuses Kristof of increasing financial discrimination against sex workers who produce content online by encouraging Visa and Mastercard to "sever ties with adult websites" (n.p.). According to Cohen, censorship only increases financial exploitation for online sex workers.

In this article, Cohen links age-verification legislation back to SESTA/FOSTA, recounting the many negative consequences of these laws for sex workers, trafficking victims, and free speech [56]. According to Cohen, SESTA/SOSTA made sex trafficking harder to find by pushing it further underground, reduced the income of sex workers and made them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and had a "chilling effect" on online speech (n.p.). She maintains, "If SESTA-FOSTA had not shut down so many websites, adult performers would have more choices about where to post their content and be less reliant

on the few companies that now monopolize the industry” (Ibid). Furthermore, in addition to lawyers, legal scholars, and technologists, Cohen quotes sex worker organizers Mike Stabile, director of public affairs at the U.S. porn trade association the Free Speech Coalition, and Savannah Sly, the codirector of the U.S. sex worker funding and capacity building organization the New Moon Network, as well as a survey by U.S. sex worker advocacy group Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) Rhode Island and an article by Grant in *The New Republic*. She, thus, centers sex worker advocacy in the fight against age-verification laws and SESTA/FOSTA, while establishing her own authority on government surveillance, financial discrimination against sex workers, and free speech.

Lastly, in an article published in 2025 in U.S. men’s magazine GQ, Cohen reports on the cultural backlash against pornography in the United States, as exemplified by age-verification laws in 17 states that require viewers to show government identification before watching porn to stop minors from viewing it [57]. Simultaneously, she explains, platforms censor online sex workers to stay in compliance with “their payment processors, who answer to credit card companies that seek to limit their liability,” and apps and websites shut down online sex worker accounts (n.p.). Ironically, this backlash against porn emerged just as the internet enabled online content creators to make indie porn on their own terms, Cohen observes.

In this article, Cohen refers to the Supreme Court Case *Free Speech Coalition, Inc. vs. Paxton* which challenged age-verification laws in Texas for violating free speech [57]. She reveals that the goal of age-verification laws, according to Project 2025 co-author Russel Vought, is to ban pornography by holding platforms liable when children access porn. She also claims that, if ruled constitutional, these laws will “enlarge the grounds on which speech can be restricted” (n.p.). However, age-gating does not work, Cohen insists; it merely drives web traffic to VPNs and non-compliant porn sites, reducing performers’ income and leading them to turn to in-person sex work and other forms of media. In this article too, Cohen quotes numerous sex workers and sex worker organizers including Stabile, Lee, Jessica Van Mier (co-founder of adult content and payment platform Mint Stars), Siri Dahl, Aella, Chloe Corrupt, and Cherri in addition to Vera Eidelman, a senior staff attorney at the ACLU, and Heather Berg, a professor of labor and gender studies at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), framing sex workers and sex worker organizers as equivalent in expertise to these more conventional sources. Here, too, Cohen claims expertise on free speech.

3.3. SISEA

SISEA was a bill introduced to Congress in 2020 by Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley. Although SISEA never received a vote, in an article for U.S. lesbian culture website *Autostraddle*, Piper reports on the proposed bill, which, she explains, would “require companies that allow sexual content to take down reported videos within two hours, maintain a 24-hour hotline to notify unauthorized videos, and construct a database of previous victims that every new upload has to be compared against” [58] (n.p.). According to Piper, because only Pornhub would be able to comply with this legislation, it would “collapse the porn industry into one monopoly [and] reduce independent work and income options for adult entertainers” (Ibid). An important predecessor to SISEA was the 2008 Protect Our Children Act, which was supposed to study the problem of adult men soliciting underage girls on the internet and propose a solution but never did, Piper asserts.

Drawing on her own family history as well as a study of 150 survivors of child sexual abuse material, Piper claims that the vast majority of child sexual abuse victims are abused by a family member or trusted community member [58]. She also accuses SISEA of shifting the blame for child sexual abuse from families onto pornography and sex workers, pushing

this abuse further underground and reinforcing the “shame and silence” around it (n.p.). In this manner, Piper challenges the idea that sex work is a social problem [23,25,26].

Piper further notes that, on 1 April 2020, Arizona Representative Paul Gosar asked the District Attorney “to investigate OnlyFans for profiting off ‘online prostitution’ and to ‘protect vulnerable people from platforms that promote coercive immoral and sexual activity’” [54] (n.p.). She maintains that this is problematic because OnlyFans “kept vulnerable people afloat during the pandemic while the government floundered over unemployment and offered many the financial means to escape coercive relationships,” and because OnlyFans humanizes sex workers (n.p.). Thus, Piper also questions mainstream media narratives stereotyping sex workers as victims [20,21]. Moreover, she grounds her expertise on SISEA in her experience as a porn performer as well as her parents’ relationship to childhood sexual abuse.

3.4. *Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act*

The Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act was also introduced to Congress in 2020 by Missouri Senator Josh Hawley. This bill would have allowed individuals to sue anyone who distributes images of forced or coerced sex acts or non-consensual images of sex acts. In her article in *The New Republic* critiquing Nick Kristof’s *New York Times* op-ed about Pornhub, Grant indicates that, following Kristof’s article, Republican senators introduced the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act of 2020, which would permit “victims of fraud, coercion, and sex abuse to sue” Pornhub [59] (n.p.). Grant points out that this bill would merely replicate the effects of SESTA/FOSTA, which Kristof also supported. Moreover, she indicates that, following Kristof’s article, Pornhub announced new policies to “restrict users’ ability to upload videos without registering and bar downloading videos altogether,” a policy performers had been requesting for years to no avail (n.p.). In this article, Grant quotes sexual image abuse survivor Rose Kalemba and porn performer Vex Ashley, who both fought to hold Pornhub accountable for hosting non-consensual content and are both critical of Kristof, constructing them as legitimate authorities on “Pornhub’s abusive and exploitative behavior towards women” (n.p.). Accordingly, Grant suggests a link between the sex workers’ rights and anti-sexual violence movements, as well as establishing her authority on the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act.

3.5. *Comparison and Synthesis*

A comparison of the previous cases reveals several major trends. First, sex worker online journalists contest stigmatizing representations of sex work in the mainstream news media. By positioning herself as both a sex worker and a sex trafficking survivor, LeMoon intervenes in feminist debates about sex work and sex trafficking to resist the conflation of the two [46]. Meanwhile, Bailey challenges the framing of sex work as a source of social contagion by drawing a comparison between concerns over internet pornography and earlier moral panics about pornography and technology in the name of protecting women and children [54]. Finally, Piper disputes the idea that sex work is a social problem by insisting that families, rather than pornography or sex workers, are the source of childhood sexual abuse, and she opposes the stereotype of sex workers as victims by asserting that OnlyFans provided vulnerable people with vital income during the COVID-19 lockdowns and allowed many people to escape abusive relationships [54]. In this way, sex worker journalists contribute to the sex worker counterpublic sphere, an oppositional discursive arena where sex workers can affirm their communal identity and stake alternative validity claims. As counterpublic discourse, their digital journalism is at once addressed to a community of sex workers and attempts to influence public opinion in the broader public sphere [36,37].

Second, sex worker online journalists construct themselves as experts, not only on sex work but also on other issues impacting sex workers and their communities, based on their lived experience in the sex trades. LeMoon draws on her dual identity as both a sex worker and trafficking survivor to position herself as an authority on trafficking as well as social media and banking discrimination against sex workers [46], and Horn claims expertise on banking discrimination based on her experience as a sex worker [48]. Moreover, Piper asserts her authority on immigration discrimination because of her experience as a dancer and porn performer [49], and she locates her expertise on SISEA in her experience as a porn performer and her family history of childhood sexual abuse [58]. By developing their expertise based on experiential knowledge, sex worker online journalists create new modes of address combining the personal and the political from their lived experience in the sex industry.

Sex workers additionally extend this expertise to other sex workers and sex worker organizers through their citational practices. Horn directly quotes porn performers Asa Akira, Nenetl Avril, and Lorelei Lee [47], as well as performers Siouxsie Q, Maggie Mayhem, and Shakti and sex worker organizer Kate D'Adamo [48]. Piper interviews Ruby, an undocumented stripper in South Florida [49]. Cohen quotes Mike Stabile (director of public affairs at the Free Speech Coalition), Savannah Sly (codirector of the New Moon Network), a survey by (COYOTE) Rhode Island, and an article by Grant in one article [56] and Stabile, Lorelei Lee, Mint Stars co-founder Jessica Van Mier, and porn performers Siri Dahl, Aella, Chloe Corrupt, and Cherri in another [57]. Likewise, Grant quotes porn performer Vex Ashley [59]. This is important because sex workers are rarely used as sources in the mainstream media [21–23,60], and as van der Meulen et al. [61] reveal, their legitimacy as knowledge sources is regularly denied because their labor is viewed as socially illegitimate.

Finally, by setting quotes by sex workers and sex worker organizers alongside quotes from representatives from other progressive organizations, sex worker online journalists strengthen connections between the sex workers' rights movement and other movements for social justice. Grant reinforces coalitions between the sex workers' rights, digital rights, and LGBTQ rights movements by citing organizations like the ACLU, the American Library Association, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, GLAAD, the National Center for Transgender Equality, and Fight for the Future [52]. Cohen quotes sex workers and sex worker organizers alongside a senior staff attorney at the ACLU and a professor of labor and gender studies at UCLA to position sex work as a civil, labor, and gender rights issue [57], while Grant emphasizes the link between the sex workers' rights and anti-gender violence movements by quoting a sexual image abuse survivor in tandem with a porn performer [59].

4. Conclusions

This article has shown how U.S. sex workers write online articles opposing anti-porn policies that harm sex workers. In the process, they contest dominant media narratives about sex work, such as the conflation of sex work and sex trafficking, sex work as a source of moral contagion, sex work as a social problem, and sex workers as victims [18–23,25–28,30]. For example, the mainstream news media frequently frame sex workers as (deserving) victims (of violence) [20–28,62]. Sex worker journalists also draw attention to violence against sex workers in their online journalism about anti-porn policy, for instance in their discussion of the impact of SESTA/FOSTA and the potential impact of the Survivors of Human Trafficking Fight Back Act. However, they do not sensationalize this violence, and they shift the blame from sex workers themselves to these harmful laws. This demonstrates how online journalism can be a tool for activists to shift public opinion

about sex work as well as anti-porn policy, bridging the literature on grassroots journalism and counterpublic spheres.

Moreover, by publishing articles online, sex worker journalists construct their expertise not only on sex work but on issues including sex trafficking, immigration, gender and sexuality, communication technology, censorship, surveillance, free speech, and constitutional law. They also reinforce sex worker expertise and position other sex workers and sex worker organizers as experts by using them as sources in their articles. Setting quotes from sex workers and sex worker organizers alongside representatives from other progressive organizations, they additionally strengthen coalitions between the sex workers' rights movement and other movements for social justice including the human rights, LGBTQ rights, immigrants' rights, digital rights, gender justice, and anti-sexual violence movements.

However, as Felski contends, counterpublic spheres are characterized by "material inequalities, which can restrict access and lead to "political antagonisms among its participants" [37] (p. 168). Such tensions are evident in sex worker online journalism as well. More marginalized sex workers such as sex workers of color, poor sex workers, transgender sex workers, street-based sex workers, undocumented sex workers, and sex workers who do not speak English have less access to media outlets and, therefore, less opportunity to share their perspectives through online journalism. Notably, all the journalists discussed in this article are white, indoor sex workers and relatively visible, English-speaking, digitally literate journalists with access to established platforms. Moreover, nearly all the sex workers quoted in these articles are porn performers, who are also relatively privileged in that their work is not *yet* criminalized, despite the stigma and discrimination they face. On one hand, this is unsurprising considering that the articles all address anti-porn policy in some fashion. On the other hand, this reveals how counterpublic spheres may exclude their more vulnerable members.

What is more, as mentioned in Section 2, a major limitation of this research is that it focuses on U.S. laws, journalists, and news outlets, which compounds these exclusions. Future research could expand this geographic reach to encompass sex worker journalists beyond the U.S. as well as articles in languages other than English. Additionally, this article does not include any articles published after May 2025, which is significant because of the rapid changes currently unfolding in the regulatory landscape for pornography in the United States. For instance, in December 2025, North Carolina House Bill 805 went into effect, expanding consent requirements and making content creation more difficult, if not impossible, in the state [63]. Furthermore, because of the methods employed, it cannot tell us about the impacts of sex worker journalism on public opinion about either sex work or anti-porn policy. Future research could address these questions.

Finally, the sex worker counterpublic sphere encompasses not only online journalism but other forms of sex worker digital media including podcasting and social media. For instance, Bailey and Horn produce podcasts, while Grant and Horn started off as bloggers before becoming journalists. Future research should investigate these forms of sex worker digital media, as well as the relationship between them. It should also examine how other sex workers consume and use sex worker digital media, for example by sharing content online to advocate against harmful laws.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Articles analyzed.

Journalist	Article Title	Publication	Date
Kaytlin Bailey	"The First Time I Was Paid for Sex"	<i>Vice</i>	6 July 2018
Kaytlin Bailey	"It's Time to Decriminalize Sex Work and Focus on Actual Crimes"	<i>Orange County Register</i>	10 January 2020
Kaytlin Bailey	"The Vice Loathing Reverend and the Sex Workers Who Took San Francisco by Storm in 1917"	<i>The Daily Beast</i>	24 January 2021
Kaytlin Bailey	"Here's Why I Celebrate International Whores Day"	<i>The Daily Beast</i>	1 June 2021
Kaytlin Bailey	"I Am a Sex Worker. Here's Why Calling Me One Matters"	<i>HuffPost</i>	16 September 2023
Kaytlin Bailey	"Moral Panic Is More Dangerous Than Porn"	<i>CounterPunch</i>	3 November 2023
Kaytlin Bailey	"What Does Decriminalized Sex Work Actually Look Like?"	<i>Reason</i>	24 May 2024
Kaytlin Bailey	"The Police Don't Protect Us"	<i>Inquest</i>	29 May 2025
Ava Cardona	"From Brothels to Independence: The Neoliberalisation of Sex Work"	<i>Open Democracy</i>	1 March 2019
Sascha Cohen	"Strippers Are Turning to Old-School Union Tactics to Fights for Fair Wages"	<i>HuffPost</i>	14 June 2019
Sascha Cohen	"How Anti-sex Work Legislation Is About to Get Worse"	<i>The Nation</i>	25 September 2023
Sascha Cohen	"The Supreme Court Case That Could End Porn as We Know It"	GQ	27 May 2025
Melissa Gira Grant	"Proposed Federal Trafficking Legislation Has Surprising Opponents: Advocates Who Work with Trafficking Victims"	<i>The Advocate</i>	26 January 2018
Melissa Gira Grant	"Liberal Feminism Has a Sex Work Problem"	<i>The New Republic</i>	4 October 2019
Melissa Gira Grant	"The New Majority Behind Sex Work Decriminalization"	<i>The New Republic</i>	30 January 2020
Melissa Gira Grant	"The Trump Administration Finally Broke the Anti-trafficking Movement"	<i>The New Republic</i>	18 February 2020
Melissa Gira Grant	"The Coronavirus Is Making Us All Camgirls"	<i>The New Republic</i>	13 May 2020
Melissa Gira Grant	"The Justice Department's Fake Fight against Sex Trafficking"	<i>The New Republic</i>	25 June 2020
Melissa Gira Grant	"The Real Story of the Bipartisan Bill That Failed Miserably on Its Own Terms"	<i>The New Republic</i>	23 June 2020
Melissa Gira Grant	"Nick Kristof and the Holy War on Pornhub"	<i>The New Republic</i>	19 December 2020
Melissa Gira Grant	"Bill Gates and Matt Gaetz Reveal the Shallow, Dangerous Truth about the American War on Sex Trafficking"	<i>The New Republic</i>	20 May 2021

Table A1. Cont.

Journalist	Article Title	Publication	Date
Melissa Gira Grant	“Republicans Are Fooling Democrats on Kid’s Online Safety”	<i>The New Republic</i>	23 August 2023
Melissa Gira Grant	“The Real Targets of Project 2025’s War on Porn”	<i>The New Republic</i>	10 July 2024
Maxine Holloway	“Why the EARN IT Act Is Terrible for Sex Workers and the Internet as a Whole”	<i>Broke-ass Stuart</i>	26 September 2020
Tina Horn	“How the Financial Sector Is Making Life Miserable for Sex Workers”	<i>Vice</i>	14 July 2014
Tina Horn	“What Do We Expect from Sex Workers on Social Media?”	<i>MEL</i>	2018
Lorelei Lee	“Bernie Sanders and My Mom and the Attack on Sex Workers”	<i>The Establishment</i>	30 April 2018
Laura LeMoon	“Trump Just Signed Legislation That Could Be Deadly for Sex Workers Like Me”	<i>HuffPost</i>	15 April 2018
Laura LeMoon	“SESTA Won’t Stop Sex Trafficking, but It Will Kill Sex Workers”	<i>Vice</i>	26 April 2018
Laura LeMoon	“As a Sex Trafficking Survivor, Lobbying for Sex Worker Rights Gave Me Hope”	<i>Vice</i>	8 June 2018
Laura LeMoon	“I’m a Sex Worker and I Can’t Get a Mainstream Job Because of My Past”	<i>HuffPost</i>	20 May 2021
Laura LeMoon	“I’m a Sex Worker and a Sex Trafficking Survivor. Shame on Bill Maher for Mocking Us”	<i>The Daily Beast</i>	31 August 2021
Laura LeMoon	“How a Sex Trafficking Law Made My Job as a Sex Worker More Dangerous”	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	7 December 2024
Laura LeMoon	“Sex Workers with HIV Got a Legal Win. It’s Not Enough”	<i>TheBody</i>	10 January 2025
Reese Piper	“What It’s Like to Be an Undocumented Sex Worker during the COVID-19 Pandemic”	<i>Rewire News Group</i>	4 April 2020
Reese Piper	“How the War in Porn Distracts Us from the Realities of Child Sexual Abuse”	<i>Autostraddle</i>	26 April 2021

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