Computers & Technology

Once a Red Line, Connecticut Reps Press for Regulating Tech Sector

— Juliann Ventura, 6.3.2024

Credit: Robin Breeding

WASHINGTON, D.C. —As new technologies like artificial intelligence drive the tech industry, members of Connecticut's federal delegation have been testing a regulatory red line drawn in Congress during the heyday of the early 1990s internet boom.

In place of what has largely been a hands-off approach to emerging computing technologies, Connecticut lawmakers are debating how best to protect consumer data and to mitigate the harm, especially to young people, of social media, TikTok and AI-generated content, with state and federal regulation.

Rep. Jim Himes, the leading Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, told CT Examiner that he thought both federal and state

regulations would be beneficial to protecting the public from criminal acts, while still driving innovation.

"The big social media platforms and big online companies operate globally," Himes said. "So, I think that when it comes to data privacy, it's important to have a national standard. You can't have 50 different data protection regimes where in one state an individual owns their data and in another state it's a free for all."

Himes added that state regulations could cover certain criminal acts, particularly with respect to minors.

"I do think that there's plenty of room for state regulation in things like fraud and criminality," he said. "If what we're talking about is trafficking in images of underage Americans, all of those sorts of crimes and fraud and criminal statutes should be state-driven."

In recent months, protecting consumers — particularly minors — on social media platforms has been a talking point in Washington.

Last month, President Joe Biden signed a bipartisan foreign aid bill into law that included a provision to force TikTok's China-based parent company either to sell the app or face a ban.

Some legislators and federal officials have claimed that the app poses a national security threat to the U.S., allowing "the Chinese government could use it to spy on Americans or weaponize it to covertly influence the U.S. public by amplifying or suppressing certain content," according to an **news report** by CBS News last month.

Earlier in March, TikTok CEO Shou Chew **reassured** lawmakers in a congressional hearing that ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, does not share American user data with the Chinese government. He also told Congress that ByteDance was not used as an "agent of China" and that the company had established rules to protect teens, like automatically making accounts private for users under the age of 16.

Still, Connecticut's lawmakers voiced concerns about privacy and young people on apps like TikTok, and they pressed fellow lawmakers to establish

some sort of regulation.

"As a parent, I see firsthand how damaging social media can be to kids," Sen. Chris Murphy said in a statement. "The social media companies know exactly the harm they're doing to our children, and yet they've doubled down on their intentionally addictive algorithms in order to pad their own pockets."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal reintroduced legislation – dubbed the Kids Online Safety Act – last year that is aimed at protecting minors from online harms by providing parents with tools to supervise minors on different platforms, and minors with safeguards that restrict access to their data.

He urged Congress to pass it, saying in a statement that the bill is necessary to "hold big tech accountable for their harms to children."

"The need for strong tech industry regulations has never been more urgent or necessary," Blumenthal said in the statement. "Congress must act swiftly to implement protections as we confront the promises and perils of artificial intelligence, and the dangerous and disturbing harms of social media to children."

Rep. Joe Courtney agreed, saying that there need to be guardrails in place when consumer — especially children's — privacy could be at stake.

"I believe we have a duty to fashion changes to online privacy and protections that protect children in a manner that does not infringe upon our constitutional right to free speech," Courtney said in a statement.

Gerry Smith, a Republican hoping to unseat Murphy in the fall elections, raised many of the same concerns in reply to a request for comment from CT Examiner, voicing support for Blumenthal's bill and applauding the safety measures and tools for parents to protect their children online.

"As much as I abhor expanding the reach of government, I am 100% in favor of Congress taking action in this area to protect our children," Smith said in a statement.

He added, "I expect safeguards allowing children access to faith-based content to be in place."

Meanwhile, Chinasa Okolo, an expert in AI governance and technology at the Center-Left Brookings Institution, urged members of Congress to rely on experts as they make decisions about tech regulation.

She added that "younger members of our society are more vulnerable to the influences that AI can hold," emphasizing the importance of establishing regulations for young people who use emerging technologies.

"I think it's important that we ensure these protections for minors, and then also ensure that they can safely interact with these tools because I don't think that banning minors or other community members from interacting with these tools is the solution," Okolo said. "We have to encourage responsible adoption, also responsible interactions, and regulation will be important in that."

As Congress considers possible tech regulations, Himes said that lawmakers will have to find a way forward that maintains the country's "innovative reputation" while also protecting the public's privacy.

"In everything from cryptocurrency to AI to social media, the whole point is to have regulation that is balanced between protecting people from fraud, from criminal acts, from violations of their liberties without stopping innovation, that's always the tension," Himes said. "It's high time that we started thinking both about data privacy, as well as regulation of things like blockchain, cryptocurrencies and some applications of artificial intelligence."

George Logan, the Republican challenger to incumbent Rep. Jahana Hayes, and Mike France, the Republican challenger to Rep. Joe Courtney, were not available for comment on this story. Rep. Rosa Delauro also did not respond to a request for comment.

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