

OPINION

FLORIDA'S REVISED DEFAMATION BILL ATTACKS CONSTITUTION AND CONSERVATIVE MEDIA



Guest Comment
Trey Radel

Florida Republican lawmakers are once again on the attack against liberal mainstream media. Their goal is to pass a new bill making it easier to sue news organizations and hold them accountable for their distortions of the truth. It sounds great in theory, but I believe conservative media will, undoubtedly, be hit the hardest.

As a Republican who works in the media, I empathize with the frustration of conservatives every time I see hit pieces, headlines and the overall framing of news stories written to run cover for the Democratic Party or intentionally hurt Republicans. Clearly, the author of the bill, Rep. Alex Andrade, R-Pensacola, feels the same way. I believe his intentions are noble.

Unfortunately, this renewed effort to revise defamation laws in the

state stirs deep concerns, echoing the same fears I voiced earlier last year. The initial bill, HB 991, would have stifled political speech and increased the legal vulnerability of media, including conservative outlets.

Rep. Andrade's pared-down version still presents significant challenges, particularly around the use of anonymous sources. This focus not only undermines nearly 60 years of U.S. Supreme Court precedent but also dismisses the historical value of anonymous speech in America—a point highlighted best by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

DeSantis has repeatedly recalled the anonymity of The Federalist Papers' authors, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison, emphasizing the long-standing tradition and importance of anonymous speech in our nation's history. His words resonate with the concerns surrounding the bill's impact on anonymity for sources, valued by whistleblowers and integral to the work of journalists exposing wrongdoing.

The bill also introduces the option to select any circuit court for internet-related defamation cases. This is sometimes referred to as "forum shopping," and it would enable anyone, including liberals and their trial-lawyer allies, to weaponize the law to target conservative media.

Simply put, the person suing gets to pick the location. That means a liberal activist lawyer can choose to go to trial in deep-blue Broward County, where no conservative would fare well with judge or jury.

Democrats, leftist activists and liberal lawyers are likely to see this as a golden opportunity to do exactly what they're doing to President Donald Trump—engage in "lawfare." Sue-happy lawyers will attack influential conservative voices, starting with independent entities that have massive reach but certainly don't have unlimited corporate defense funds. That includes individuals such as Benny Johnson and Dave Rubin, as well as center-right media organizations like Florida's Voice and The Floridian, and my Na-

ples/Fort Myers radio station, a FOX News affiliate.

These organizations will be crippled with legal bills, threatening their ability to provide the counterweight they present every day to the liberal media outlets.

Speaking of Rubin and Johnson, who create unique and cutting-edge content often laced with humor and sarcasm, the bill also attempts to define and lay out AI-guidelines with a "false light" provision.

It states, "A person who uses artificial intelligence to create or edit any form of media so that it attributes something false to or leads a reasonable viewer to believe something false about another person is subject to liability."


This opens a Pandora's box of infinite legal challenges. Where do we even start? Define "believe." Define "false." Who defines those words?

Not only is this component of the bill irresponsibly vague, it states that anyone can sue if "the false light in which the other person was placed would be highly offensive to a rea-

sonable person."

Again, define "highly offensive." Better yet, can someone please tell me who is a "reasonable person?"

In his defense of the bill, Rep. Andrade argues for the need to balance the scales for public figures in defamation cases. As a conservative, I understand the urge to counteract the liberal-dominated media landscape. However, his approach overlooks the bedrock of our country—the First Amendment. It will inadvertently silence the very voices it seeks to protect, echoing DeSantis' concerns about the importance of safeguarding our Constitutional right to free speech.

Editor's Note: This commentary by Fox 92.5 host Trey Radel opposes both defamation proposals, House Bill 757 and Senate Bill 1086. Radel is a Republican who previously represented Florida in the U.S. House of Representatives. Radel's Fox News radio affiliate in Florida shares its parent company with The Naples Press. 

GUEST COMMENTARY

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS MONTH: BEWARE OF COMMON SIGNS



The Shelter
Linda Oberhaus

Stephanie (name changed to protect the victim's identity) was a smart, middle-class college student with a bright future when Paul, her boyfriend of two months, suggested she try out for a swimsuit photoshoot, telling her she had plenty of potential and the money was good.

He dropped her off at a hotel to meet with the photographer, but instead of a swimsuit shoot, the photographer ordered Stephanie to remove her clothing. When she refused, he said she could not leave

until she did everything she was told. After taking compromising photos of her, the photographer raped Stephanie. When Paul returned, Stephanie tearfully told him what had happened to her. Instead of consoling her, he slapped her, called her a whore and said the photos would be posted online and sent to her family if she didn't do whatever she was told. Even as he sold her for sex, it was difficult for Stephanie to comprehend that Paul had never been a boyfriend, but a sex trafficker who had meticulously groomed her for financial profit.

The story above happened here in Naples, and it happens every day throughout Florida, the United States and the world. Like Steph-

anie, anyone can be targeted, but most victims are chosen by their trafficker based on vulnerabilities such as loneliness, homelessness, substance abuse or mental health issues. Once caught in their trafficker's web, victims are exploited through a range of bodily threats, intimidation and coercion.


Today, Florida ranks third in the nation for calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, preceded only by California and Texas. In 2021, the most current statistics available, more than 85% of Florida's calls to the hotline pertained to sex trafficking. Although the venue of most reports was not specified, the top three were motels/hotels, illicit spas and private residences. In 2020, strip clubs

and street-based solicitation fell to the bottom of the list, as the pandemic shifted trafficking from the streets to online venues, strengthening it by making it more difficult to detect. Even in the midst of a global pandemic that suppressed commercial activity across industries, human trafficking continued to thrive.

During January's National Human Trafficking Awareness Month, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children urges all residents to educate themselves and their children on the signs of this horrific crime and ways to protect themselves. We know that public awareness is working, as calls to the Trafficking Hotline have increased 45% since 2016.

The Shelter is proud to be Collier County's official service provider for human trafficking victims, offering specific, long-term therapeutic care at our Shelly Stayer Shelter in Immokalee, as well as prevention education in Collier County schools. To educate yourself on human trafficking or schedule an awareness presentation, go to naplesshelter.org/trafficking or call 239.775.3862.

If you or someone you know has been affected by domestic violence or human trafficking, go to naplesshelter.org or call The Shelter's Crisis Hotline at 239.775.1101.

Linda Oberhaus is CEO of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children. 

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ELLIPTIGO

est per capita in the country.


"We have been really excited about our success growing ElliptiGO ridership across the country, but we are blown away by our success in Collier County," said ElliptiGO CEO Bryan Pate. "This region of Florida is exploding in terms of ElliptiGO ridership, and it has been amazing to watch it outpace much larger counties in terms of adoption. I think it says a lot about the importance of fitness to the people in Collier County."

Ironman triathletes Pate and Brent Teal, ElliptiGO's chief technical officer, founded the company in 2008 after Pate lost the ability to run due to repetitive injuries. He didn't want to be restricted to the gym, so he came up with the idea of an outdoor elliptical trainer.

Teal, a mechanical engineer, created the first prototype in 2005 and it went through five more iterations before the first ElliptiGO was manufactured and sold in 2010. ElliptiGOs have grown in popularity—the long strides can be shared by spouses because they're adjustable, and they're good for people with knee and back problems

and seniors due to their smooth gliding motion.

"People just love it because it delivers exercise in a super-low impact way and is enjoyable," Pate said. "Our biggest challenge is awareness. There are still a ton of people who haven't seen it before. We have a real hurdle to overcome to inform the millions of dedicated runners who now can no longer run."

For more information about ElliptiGOs or to find a dealer, visit elliptigo.com. To join an ElliptiGO ride in Naples, get more information or request a trial, email Ruffolo at elliptigonaples@gmail.com. 



"People just love it because it delivers exercise in a super low-impact way and is enjoyable."

—Bryan Pate,
CEO of ElliptiGO



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