

**U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Field Hearing:**

“Take It Down: Ending Big Tech’s Complicity In Revenge Porn”

June 26, 2024

Testimony of Ms. Hollie Toups

Over a decade ago, I suddenly found myself in a disturbing and unfamiliar world. Intimate images that were of a personal nature, had been posted on a website and shared with the world.

As I entered into this alternate universe, I wasn’t sure what to do. I was overcome with an eerie feeling knowing that there were people in real-time looking at me without my consent. It was frightening. Who did this? And why?

But it wasn’t just pictures. There were comments, threats, personal information about me. Immediately, I felt unsafe in my own home and uncomfortable in my own skin. I was terrified, helpless and I just wanted to climb in bed, pull the covers over my head and never come out. I spent the next few days bouncing back and forth between panic, anger, embarrassment, and being completely devastated.

Everyone in my hometown was talking about the website. When in public, I was approached by strangers who had no boundaries. They had, after all, seen pictures of me topless. They felt like they knew me, and they assumed I wanted the attention.

At the time, I was pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice, volunteering as guardian ad litem to youth in foster care and also working as a teacher’s aide. I was terrified of losing my job and of putting the kids I was appointed to in danger.

As soon as I was able to get myself together, I emailed the website, explaining the pictures were posted without my consent, and I requested they be removed. This was, after all, an egregious invasion of privacy. I

was confident they would agree and that would be the end of it. Because why wouldn't they? However, I was wrong. They replied they would be happy to remove my photos for a fee. Shocked, I responded that I would not pay to remove pictures they had posted without my consent, I would however hire a lawyer.

I wasn't sure I could afford a lawyer, so I first sought assistance from law enforcement. However, there was little they could do. At the time, sharing intimate photos without consent on the internet was something new and the laws had not caught up.

I reached out to a lawyer in town. He agreed to send a letter to the website demanding the removal of my photos, but nothing legally could be done as he felt they were protected by Section 230. It looked as if they were free to do as they pleased. His suggestion was essentially, *live and learn*. This was not acceptable to me. I was being used for someone's sexual and revengeful pleasure, I was being exploited and they had attempted to extort money from me. How was it they were protected, while I was not. I would not let this be my story, this would not overcome me.

Someone suggested I see a private investigator to see what they could do. As I told him my story, I completely broke down because I had up until this point felt completely helpless. This weight I had carried for the past few months had become too much. I, a victim's advocate, desperately needed an advocate.

By this time, the photos had been shared with another site, compounding the trauma. And no one could help me; no one could stop the millions of eyes from seeing my body and saving them and passing them on. No one could stop the harassment and threats.

He assured me he would do whatever it took to get my privacy back and put my life back in my hands. Within a few days of speaking with the

investigator, my pictures were removed from one of the sites, and as you can imagine...I breathed for the first time in months.

The investigator warned me that it may not be over, but he was going to stick with me until it ended. I found myself checking the site to be sure my pictures were not back up. Wake up, pour coffee, and check the website - repeat.

Just when I was beginning to feel like it was over, they were up again. This time, on the front page. The perpetrators bragged about their ability to freely do as they pleased because they were protected by Section 230. At one point, they even posted an excerpt from Section 230, bragging about their “protections”.

From there, my photos continued to be shared from website to website. It was like a whack-a-mole trying to get them down as they continued to pop back up. The comments and harassment increased.

With the help of the investigator, I met with another lawyer who agreed to help me. I had gathered names of other local women posted on the same site and he also agreed to assist them as well.

They all had a story. Some had attempted to take their own life, some lost jobs, some were underage. We filed a lawsuit, naming the site host as well. Unfortunately, when I chose to stand up for myself and fight for my privacy, the harassment got worse. But that original site was eventually shut down and the site owner identified.

At some point, after wallowing in depression I became angry. This could not stand. I reached out to my state representative which led me to connect with then Texas Senator Garcia and Representative Gonzales. I had the honor of contributing to Texas passing the Relationship Privacy act, aimed at safeguarding Texans from this unwarranted harm.

While we were able to determine who started the website, I never was able to confirm who posted my photos and how they got possession of

them. That was very hard to come to terms with, having no closure or answers.

For months after, I checked the internet every day to make sure my photos were not back up. Every day, it controlled me. I often think of threats and messages I received on that website and on social media and of others who have gone through the same thing. It is hard to put into a few minutes what that year was like. These actions can inflict long-term harmful psychological, personal, and social repercussions for victims. I have gone through a lot of therapy to get past it. I am immensely grateful for my support system during that time, and for those who fought for me, as I am not sure where I would have ended up without them.

It still to this day, amazes me that with the click of a button your body, your privacy and your personal information can be exposed for the world to see. And it continues to this day. We have come a long way since my photos were posted without my consent. And while I am grateful to see progress has been made to protect others and protections are being put in place, there is still more to do.

I think we can all agree on the importance of privacy. I think we can all agree that things of an intimate nature should be kept private and not disclosed to the world by individuals who seek to harm others, and additionally that bad actors should not be permitted to create intimate images with someone's likeness.

Thank you all for your time and for bringing this forward.