

Memorandum in Opposition to Rhode Island Senate Bill 2610

The members of Media Coalition believe that Senate Bill 2610 violates the First Amendment for multiple reasons. The trade associations and other organizations that comprise Media Coalition have many members throughout the country including Rhode Island: publishers, booksellers and librarians as well as manufacturers and retailers of recordings, films, videos and video games.

S.B. 2610 would create section 11-9-1.5, which would criminalize the knowing and intentional use of a computer or electronic device to disseminate depictions of graphic or lascivious nudity or graphic sexual conduct to a person known or believed to be a minor. A violation of the legislation would be a felony subject to five years in prison, a fine of \$5,000 or both. Any person convicted of violating 11-9-1.5 would have to file with the state as a sex offender.

Section 11-9-1.5 would apply to material based on its content and, therefore, it is immediately constitutionally suspect. The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that a content-based restriction on speech is presumptively invalid. *See, e.g. R.A.V. v. City of St Paul*, 505 U.S. 377, 382 (1992). Speech is protected unless the Supreme Court tells us otherwise. Justice Kennedy said in *Free Speech Coalition v. Ashcroft*, “As a general principle, the First Amendment bars the government from dictating what we see or read or speak or hear. The freedom of speech has its limits; it does not embrace certain categories of speech, including defamation, incitement, obscenity and pornography produced with children.” 535 U.S.234, 241 (2002). Unless speech falls into one of these limited categories or is otherwise tied to an illegal act such as luring or enticing a minor, there is no basis for the government to bar access to such material.

The speech criminalized in S.B. 2610 is unconstitutionally overbroad. It goes far beyond what the Supreme Court has said can be proscribed for minors, which it announced in the three-part test in *Ginsberg v. New York*, 390 U.S. 629 (1968), modified by *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973). The *Miller/Ginsberg* test holds that speech that is otherwise legal for adults may be banned for minors only if it depicts or describes explicit sexual activity or nudity and, when taken as a whole:

1. predominantly appeals to the prurient, shameful or morbid interest of minors in sex;
2. is patently offensive to prevailing standards in the adult community as a whole with respect to what is suitable material for minors; and
3. lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.

The Court has affirmed this ruling and cautioned that though minors do not enjoy the protection

of the First Amendment to the same extent as adults, “minors are entitled to a significant measure of First Amendment protection, and only in relatively narrow and well-defined circumstances may government bar public dissemination of protected material to them.” *Erznoznick v. City of Jacksonville*, 422 U.S. 212-13 (1975). Governments may restrict minors’ access to some sexually explicit speech but it is a narrow range of material determined by a specific test.

The definition in S.B. 2610 does not include any of the prongs from the *Miller/Ginsberg* test. In 1997, the Supreme Court struck down the Computer Decency Act (CDA), in part, because it would have criminalized speech on the Internet far beyond what was permitted under *Miller/Ginsberg*. *Reno v. ACLU*, 117 S.Ct. 2329 (1997). In 2010, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down an Oregon law barring dissemination of sexual material to minors as overbroad for making illegal material that was beyond the scope of *Miller/Ginsberg*. *Powell’s Books v. Kroger*, 622 F.3d 1202 (9th Cir. 2010). An Illinois law that barred the sale to minors of video games with sexual content but omitted the third prong of the *Miller/Ginsberg* test was permanently enjoined by the U.S. District Court and the ruling was vigorously affirmed by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. *Entertainment Software Ass’n v. Blagojevich*, 469 F.3d 642 (7th Cir. 2006) *aff’d* 404 F. Supp. 2d 1051 (N.D. Ill. 2005).

Even if the definition of what material is illegal for minors incorporated the three-prong test in *Miller/Ginsberg*, it would be unconstitutional if the restriction was applied to general communication on the Internet, websites, listservs and in public chatrooms and social networking sites. Speech that may be illegal for minors may not be criminalized in a manner that unduly burdens the rights of adults to access it. Applying the *Miller/Ginsberg* test to cyberspace is to treat material disseminated on the Internet as if there were no difference between a website or blog and a book or magazine. But cyberspace is not like a bookstore. When a person speaks generally through a website or in a chatroom, there is no way to know whether the person receiving sexual material is a minor or an adult. At the same time, anyone who makes material available on the Internet through a website, listserv or public chatroom knows that there is a minor accessing his or her content. That general knowledge satisfies the scienter requirement in a criminal statute. As a result, the effect of banning the computer dissemination of material with sexual content is to force a provider, whether a publisher or an on-line carrier, to deny access to both minors and adults, depriving adults of their First Amendment rights.

There is a substantial body of case law striking down laws that criminalize speech that is generally available on the Internet. Courts have repeatedly ruled that such laws violate the First Amendment because they restrict the speech of adults on the Internet to what is acceptable for minors. Also, courts have held that there are less restrictive and more effective means for preventing minors from accessing such content that does not infringe on the speech of adults. In addition to striking down CDA in *Reno v. ACLU*, a second federal law, the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) and eight similar state laws have been held unconstitutional as violating the First Amendment. *ACLU v. Gonzales*, 478 F. Supp. 2d 775 (E.D. Pa. 2007), *aff’d* sub nom. *Mukasey v. ACLU*, 534 F.2d 181 (3d Cir 2008), cert. den. 129 Sup. Ct. 1032 (2009); *PSINet v. Chapman*, 63 F.3d 227 (4th Cir. 2004); *American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression v. Dean*, 342 F.3d 96 (2d Cir 2003); *Cyberspace Communications, Inc. v. Engler*, 238 F.3d 420 (6th Cir. 2000); *ACLU v. Johnson*, 194 F.3d 1149 (10th Cir. 1999); *Southeast Booksellers v.*

McMasters 282 F. Supp 2d 1180 (D.S.C. 2003); *ACLU v. Goddard*, Civ No. 00-0505 TUC AM (D. Ariz. 2002); *American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression v. Coakley*, 2010 WL 4273802 (D. Mass. 2010); *American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression v. Sullivan*, 799 F. Supp. 2d 1078 (D. Alaska 2011). A ninth state law was struck down as violating the Commerce Clause of the Constitution. *American Libraries Ass'n v. Pataki* 969 F. Supp. 160 (S.D. 1997). Two other state laws were substantially narrowed as to not apply to general dissemination of speech on the Internet. *Florence v. Shurtleff*, U.S. District Court for the District of Utah (No. 2:05CV00495 DB); *American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression v. Strickland*, 601 F.3d 622 (6th Cir. 2010). Many of these cases, including *American Booksellers v. Coakley*, were brought by Media Coalition members and the cases were litigated by our general counsel. The court opinions in all of these cases are available on the litigation page of our website at: <http://mediacoalition.org/litigation/#internet>.

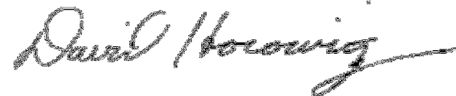
The only exceptions to these decisions have been laws that were tied to luring or enticing a minor to engage in unlawful activity or were limited to speech that meets the Supreme Court's three-prong test for sexual material "harmful to minors" and that was intended to be communicated directly to a specific person the speaker has actual, rather than general, knowledge is a minor or believes to be a minor. Even if this is the intent of the legislation, it is not the plain language of the text and it is not enough that the government tells us it will only be used in such a manner. As Justice Roberts wrote in *U.S. v. Stevens*, "But the First Amendment protects against the Government; it does not leave us at the mercy of *noblesse oblige*. We would not uphold an unconstitutional statute merely because the Government promised to use it responsibly." 130 S. Ct. 1577, 1591 (2010).

Passage of this bill could prove costly. If a court declares it unconstitutional, there is a good possibility that the state will be ordered to pay the plaintiffs' attorney's fees. In past challenges to such legislation, states have paid to the plaintiffs as much as \$450,000 in legal fees.

We believe Rhode Island can protect minors while also respecting the First Amendment rights of adults and older minors. We are happy to work with the legislature to help it to do so. If you would like to discuss further our concerns about this bill, please contact me at 212-587-4025 #3 or at horowitz@mediacoalition.org.

Again, we ask you to please protect the First Amendment rights of all the people of Rhode Island and amend or defeat S.B. 2160.

Respectfully submitted,



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