

## Unlovely Congress

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If you recently tried to post a personal ad on Craigslist, the popular classified-ad site, you were in for a shock. Craigslist has suddenly discontinued all personals. You can still sell your used rototiller, but forget about telling the world you're lost in Louisville looking for love.

The company doesn't want to be prosecuted for helping people find each other en route to becoming partners in outlawry.

If the principle underlying this law were consistently applied, any good or service that facilitates communication (or other human activity!) would expose providers to liability for any illegal conduct abetted by their products.

Congress has just passed legislation subjecting site publishers to criminal and civil liability when their users "misuse online personals unlawfully." The president's signature is expected. Craigslist doesn't want all that open-ended liability. "Any tool or service can be misused," it observes.



Indeed. If the principle underlying this law were consistently applied, *any* good or service that facilitates communication (or other human activity!) would expose providers to liability for any illegal conduct abetted by their products. Would curtain manufacturers be exempt? We all know how bad guys plotting evil pull their curtains. Freedom of speech, freedom of casual encounters, freedom of curtain-trafficking, it's all at risk.

What about Congress's goal of discouraging prostitution?

Will all U.S. prostitutes now retire?

Not if the last several thousand years are any clue. Especially as other sites follow Craigslist's lead, prostitutes who had escaped the streets thanks to online means of client-hunting will tend to return to those streets. If so, neighborhoods less seedy and less dangerous thanks to Craigslist etc. will now tend to reacquire such unlovely qualities.

Thanks to (unlovely) Congress.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.