

STATE OF THE NET

A photograph of the United States Capitol dome in Washington, D.C., set against a clear blue sky. The dome is the central focus, with its white marble structure and the Statue of Freedom on top. The image is used as a background for the event title.

Keynote with Senator Marsha Blackburn

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05 Keynote with Senator Marsha Blackburn

Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN): Delighted to join you, and Senator Markey and I have had such a wonderful relationship working on technology policy, whether we were in the House or now in the Senate, and we each served on Energy and Commerce, when we were in the House, and now we're each on Commerce over in the Senate. So, we are looking forward to a good year, and I am so pleased to be with you all. I appreciate the Internet Education Foundation and the great work that they have done on these issues.

Of course, we have a new Congress, so that means a new set of priorities, and the ability to move forward on issues that are important to you all. We know that much of this is going to apply to tech policy, and we are looking forward to backing away from some overhanded regulation like net neutrality, and a focus on access, innovation, and investment that will, we hope, foster growth and innovation on the Internet.

I do want to talk about a couple of the things that we are going to focus on, as we work to establish standards and safeguards, and ensure safety in the virtual space, especially when it comes to protecting our children, and, certainly in this day and age, when it comes to addressing cybersecurity. We know that, as we look at innovation, it is imperative for America to stay at the forefront of critical and emerging technologies like AI, quantum, and spectrum.

So, let me start with children's online safety. As you all know. Senator Blumenthal and I have spent the last four and a half years working on the Kids Online Safety Act, to put in place what is necessary to protect our children in the virtual space, and we have been so pleased to be joined by 91 of our Senate colleagues. We have a majority in the House. We are working with House leadership to make certain we can get this bill through in the House, to provide the toolkit that is necessary for our children to be safe in the virtual space, so that kids and parents have the tools that are necessary to protect them.

You know, it's so interesting to me that in the physical space, we have laws that are there that prohibit you from exposing children to alcohol, tobacco, pornography, things of that nature, but that does not exist in the virtual space, and because of that, children are inundated. 24 /7/365 with these exposures.

So, it is going to be so important that we continue this push, and that we move forward with this. I had talked with a mom last year, whose 17 year old son died because he got what he thought was a Xanax, and it was fentanyl. And this was a STAR student, a standout athlete, who took one pill. And, as she said repeatedly to me, one mistake ought not to be a death sentence. But we are seeing that happen over and over. The pill came from someone he met on Snapchat.

Think about the devastation that is there.

Also, last Congress, the Report Act was signed into law by President Biden. This is legislation that Senator Ossoff and I worked on together, and what it did was to require these big tech platforms to report crimes against children involving sex trafficking, grooming, and enticement for sexual acts, and report all of that to NCMEC. We think that was the important step to take because it closed a gap in our laws. Beforehand, you only had to report CSAM, now, you have to report the entire grouping of crimes.

We know that it is going to be imperative that we continue to move forward to push the Kids Online Safety Act, to get that signed into law. Because, if we don't, then you're not going to have that toolbox, parents are not going to have that toolbox that will help them to identify these harms.

So, progress was made last year, but still getting that Kids Online Safety Act across the finish line is going to be an imperative.

And I will tell you, as Senator Blumenthal and I have held hearings, as we have worked with parents and physicians and teachers and principals, they have pointed out repeatedly the importance of putting this responsibility on the technology platforms, to have that duty of care, to have that standard, and to take the steps that are necessary to protect children in the virtual place.

That is why the Report Act was important to get signed into law this Year. And we're grateful that president Biden did that. And, it is why KOSA has to be finished this year.

Let me move to cybersecurity, because this is one of the big issues that you're going to see us focused on at Commerce Committee.

As you know, I'm going to lead Consumer Protection Data Security at Commerce, and I'm going to lead Privacy and Technology at Judiciary Committee, and we all know that you cannot have national security unless you're going to be aggressive with cyber security. We also all saw what happened with Salt Typhoon, and we saw how the Chinese communist hackers infiltrated our US systems and telecom companies, and they gathered text messages, phone numbers, IP addresses, and a tremendous amount of PII.

Their victims, the people they hacked, included high level candidates and officials including then presidential candidate Trump and VP nominee J. D. Vance, and these attacks represent some of the greatest threats to our nation's security.

One of the biggest vulnerabilities that we have is with our wireless routers, which were, potential entry points for the Salt Typhoon hackers. Tens of millions of families and small businesses across the country use wireless routers as their primary access point to the Internet, yet many are open to infiltration by foreign actors, including China.

And, the threat is even greater with routers that are developed by Chinese companies. Just last year, China-linked hackers in Europe targeted home owners and home routers that were developed by the Chinese company TP-Link, whose products U. S. cybersecurity experts have repeatedly warned are susceptible to cyber attacks. Despite the vulnerabilities, several federal agencies, including the Defense Department, have purchased TP-Link routers.

Thankfully, there is growing momentum on Capitol Hill to address the issue. We do have the Routers Act. This is something I'm leading in the Senate, congressman Latta is leading it in the House, and it would require the Commerce Department to review the national security threat posed by any router that is sourced from a company under the jurisdiction of China, as well as U. S. adversaries like Russia. Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela. Depending on the study's outcome, Congress could take further action to require the Commerce Department to designate dangerous routers as a national security threat, allowing the FCC to halt their sale in America.

I want to stay ahead of our adversaries, and know that we're going to need to focus on cyber security, and some of these other emerging technologies that are shaping the global economy in years to come.

Now, Senator Markey mentioned artificial intelligence, and we know that AI is breaking barriers when it comes to logistics, the financial industry, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, medical research, and so many other areas. From a policy perspective, we should be supporting this type of incredible development.

AI can be used for tremendous good, and it can also be exploited by bad actors. We're already seeing concern with China's DeepSeek. Instead of serving as a source for factual information, the AI program is really kowtowing, and towing the line for the Chinese Communist Party, refusing to even answer questions about Tiananmen Square.

Coming from Tennessee, which is home to some of our nation's greatest musicians, I also have serious concerns about how AI can hurt our artists, our songwriters, and our creative community. Already, we're seeing an explosion in digital replicas that copy a creator's voice or likeness without consent, directly threatening their livelihoods. That's why, along with Senator Coons, Klobuchar, and Tillis, I introduced the bipartisan NO FAKES Act, which would hold individuals or companies liable if they produce an unauthorized digital replica of an individual or of a performance.

You may also remember that Tennessee took many of these provisions, and they put in place a state law, the ELVIS Act. They were the first in the country to do that.

And, alongside Senator Cantwell and Heinrich, I introduced the COPIED Act, which would better defend artists and performance against deep fakes and inauthentic replicas and content.

All these issues point toward a need for comprehensive privacy legislation. AI systems run on data, yet people must have control over what I call their virtual you. It is past time for Congress to take action on this issue. It is time for a national preemptive online privacy standard.

And, we will be focusing on that as we continue to focus on what AI has to offer.

In much the same way, we are focusing on the development of quantum. We are seeing how this incredible technology has the potential to transform everything from automotive and chemical industries, to pharmaceuticals and financial services. In Tennessee, we are very well aware of what can be done with quantum. Oak Ridge National Labs is home to our fastest computer on the face of the earth, the Frontier, and we know that they are pioneering groundbreaking research on a regular, ongoing basis.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, the Electric Power Board, the EPB, and its industry partners are testing new technologies using the country's first commercially available quantum network.

On the Senate Commerce Committee, we're looking at how we can support this critical work, especially as Beijing is continuing to pour billions of dollars. In 2023, alongside Senators Luján, Risch, and Durbin, I launched the Senate National Labs Caucus. This initiative helps lawmakers collaborate with scientists from the Department of Energy's network of 17 national labs.

We're working on legislation to support quantum research and other important emerging technologies. We're also working on a range of bipartisan bills to promote quantum development and research. The Quantum Sandbox for Near-Term Application Act, which is something Senator Lujan and I have developed. It would establish a program for sandboxing these near-term technologies.

We also have legislation to establish a Manufacturing USA Institute for Development of Quantum Technologies and Applications, and the Defense Quantum Acceleration Act, to supercharge the Defense Department's approach to quantum technology.

At our Commerce Committee, we are looking at what is necessary to reauthorize the National Quantum Initiative Act, and making this a priority for the Commerce Committee. Now, the Quantum Initiative Act was established in 2018. It supported research and development and improved coordination between industry and government. It promoted international standards for quantum. It expired last year. We are looking to reinvigorate this as an important component of re shoring and returning manufacturing to U. S. shores.

We can't have 21st century health care, economic development, and education, or law enforcement, without access to 21st century broadband, which is why it is so important that we address the issue of spectrum. One of the biggest obstacles we face are federal agencies squatting on unused spectrum that could be used more efficiently.

Currently, in fact, about 60 percent of spectrum bands are under U. S. government control. That's why I've called for an audit of federal spectrum usage, so we can free up spectrum and get it to commercial use. It's why Congress must provide the FCC with Spectrum Audit Authority, that lapsed in March of 23, and it lapsed for the first time in 30 years.

We are going to have to restore that auction authority, and then move forward with legislation that will build a spectrum pipeline. Getting available spectrum to auction could be as much as a 100 billion dollar revenue item for the federal government.

So, these are issues that we're going to have before us at Commerce and at Judiciary, as you can see, making certain that we are focused on emerging technologies, that we are focused on Internet and access, and utilizing this as we grow our economy. As we expand, making certain that we are setting these standards.

These are items we're approaching in a bipartisan way. We hope that you will continue to work with us. I appreciate so much the work that you are doing, and the opportunity to join you for a few moments today. Thank you so much.