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Daniela Peterka-Benton

Montclair State University, peterkabentd@montclair.edu

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Sound of Freedom: A summer blockbuster movie with an edge (November 2023)

Daniela Peterka-Benton, Ph.D.

Academic Director Global Center on Human Trafficking, Montclair State University

The summer of 2023 gave us the blockbuster hits Barbie and Oppenheimer, but it also surprised us with an unexpected box office hit. It was one that introduced a much more solemn plot than the fantastic plastic Barbieverse. The Sound of Freedom opened on America's most patriotic holiday, July 4th 2023, and made [nearly \\$131 million at the box office](#) in just its first three weeks. The action film directed and co-written by Alejandro Monteverde, and starring Jim Caviezel, Mira Sorvino and Bill Camp is based on the "true" story of Tim Ballard, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security agent who investigated pedophiles. Tim Ballard is well known in anti-trafficking circles as the founder and former CEO of the anti-trafficking group [Operation Underground Railroad](#), an organization that claims to "*lead the fight against child sex trafficking and sexual exploitation around the globe*". According to O.U.R.'s website, its team is comprised of highly experienced and trained former law enforcement personnel, intelligence experts, US diplomats, and military officers who are conducting active investigations globally. Sound of Freedom tells the story of Tim Ballard who embarks on a life-threatening mission to save children from Colombian sex traffickers. The story of sexual exploitation, which is repeated daily across the world, is a sad one that takes the viewer into the darkest corners of human morality and sheer disregard of human life, dignity, and liberty. It is, however, not the first time that Hollywood has presented human trafficking narratives. Other instances have included [Trafficked](#) (2017), [Taken](#) (2008) or the mini-series [Human Trafficking](#) (2005).

Sound of Freedom, however, struck a nerve in the culture wars of 2023 and received considerable backlash from human trafficking experts for its [sensationalized depiction](#) of child trafficking.

So, what is different with Sound of Freedom?

Some critics of the movie are concerned that the choice of depicting child sexual trafficking has been amplified by QAnon conspiracy theorists who continue to spread misinformation on a secret, global "cabal" of elites who are sexually abusing children. While Sound of Freedom makes no references to this conspiracy, the movie's lead actor, Jim Caviezel, has been a [prominent promoter](#) of this and other baseless QAnon conspiracy for years. So, unsurprisingly, soon after the film's release, former president Trump hosted a private screening of the movie along with election denier [Kari Lake](#), right-wing populist [Steve Bannon](#) and QAnon adherent [Jack Posobiac](#). This is consistent with the former president's previous statements as Mr. Trump has falsely accused prominent democratic leaders of running an illegal pedophile ring during his presidency.

Discourse surrounding the movie has found its way into policy discussion with some Republicans pressing for hearings on human trafficking as a result of items presented in the film. In a [GOP letter](#) to the Democratic chairmen of the Senates' Judiciary, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and Foreign Relations committees, Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin stated that "The United States Senate must continue to conduct much-needed oversight of this administration's border policies to find immediate solutions to combat one of the most disturbing consequences of inadequate border security: the proliferation of human trafficking," the senators said.

The further politicizing of anti-trafficking efforts, which appear to be driven by what is depicted in a Hollywood action movie is what makes the controversies around Sound of Freedom unique. While the anti-trafficking world would welcome increased political interest in the subject matter, human trafficking is so much more than child sexual exploitation. Global prevalence data for human trafficking is difficult to assess due to the hidden nature of the crime and great variation in legislation and enforcement of human trafficking in countries around the world. According to the 2022 Global Report on Human Trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), victims of sexual exploitation make up 38.7% of detected cases, and 38.8% of labor exploitation with the rest experiencing mixed sexual/labor and other forms of exploitation. Children make up 35% of detected victims in 2020. In 2022 the [International Labor Organization](#) (ILO) estimated 27.6 million people exploited in forced labor, 17.3 million of which are exploited in the private sector; 6.3 million in forced commercial sexual exploitation, and 3.9 million in forced labor imposed by state. The vast majority of victims in forced commercial sexual exploitation are women and girls (4.9 million), but they also make up a sizable portion of victims in labor exploitation (6 million).

In the United States, reliable prevalence data is equally hard to come by. This is because the data sources used each space only provide a snippet of the entire picture of human trafficking. Some data is collected by service providers which isn't shared widely to protect survivors' identities. Other data comes from law enforcement, which focuses primarily on sexual exploitation. Court systems provide data but they represent only a fraction of cases that lead to prosecution. As such, it is impossible to aggregate this data for a realistic assessment of prevalence. Therefore, it is not feasible to definitively tell how much trafficking there is and what types of exploitation occur. Programs, funding, and policy changes rely on defined and communicated areas of need. With incomplete data, we're left with an uncomfortable question- what if the presentation of human trafficking fails to include all forms of exploitation and victims?

This question stands at the core of the controversies surrounding the Sound of Freedom and its political entanglements. The movie's depiction of human trafficking is done through the lens of child abduction for the purposes of sexual exploitation. While such cases exist, they are not necessarily typical of human trafficking based on existing data. Child trafficking through abduction is [actually rarely reported](#), instead children are frequently recruited by people they trust, such as family, friends or other 'trusted' adults. It is this the abuse of trust and not kidnapping in most cases.

Likewise, labor trafficking exists in the United States, however there are many knowledge gaps about this type of exploitation, because it doesn't receive the same kind of attention as sex trafficking. [Research is needed](#) to create an understanding of the complexity of labor trafficking, and to evaluate evidence-based programs or policies, but data to do so is often poorly collected/interpreted or not available at all.

Anti-trafficking advocates worry that the presentation of trafficking through movies such as Sound of Freedom, might take away resources and much needed policy changes recommended by survivors who are simply not seen.

Is Sound of Freedom a bad movie? No, but it's just that- a movie. It is not a documentary, it is not a research film and therefore it shouldn't be used to push political agendas which neglect vast areas of human trafficking to the detriment of its many victims.