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Trevor Neilson, Hollywood's King of Philanthropy, and the Bad Advice He Gives to Clients Like Ashton Kutcher

By Caleb Hannan Fri., Jul. 1 2011 at 6:35 PM

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Trevor Neilson, [Hollywood's King of Philanthropy](#), deserves credit for one thing: According to Mayor Mike McGinn, it was [this Neilson Tweet](#) that prompted today's press conference at City Hall on the need for more cooperation in the fight against underage sex trafficking.

But that's where the credit stops. Because Neilson's Tweet to McGinn wasn't just a bid to draw more attention to a worthy cause. It was part of a larger campaign to *divert* attention from his own shoddy work.

Earlier this week, Village Voice Media reported on [Neilson's work with Ashton Kutcher](#), the lovable doofus who first came to prominence on *That '70s Show*. Neilson, a celebrity charity consultant who advises stars like Madonna, helped Kutcher and his wife Demi Moore start the [DNA Foundation](#), a nonprofit devoted to ending sex trafficking.

The intent was good. The execution was not.

As part of a media blitz to promote their bizarre "Real Men" campaign, which featured celebrities like Justin Timberlake doing inane things like making grilled-cheese sandwiches with a hot iron, Neilson fed Kutcher and Moore some frightening numbers. The most frightening: an estimate that claimed there are between 100,000 to 300,000 child sex slaves in the United States today, which the celebrity couple then repeated during an appearance on CNN.

For a PR guy like Neilson, a former spokesperson for Seattle Public Schools who now pulls in \$200,000 a year for his services, slipping Kutcher and Moore the eye-popping number was a no-brainer. Newspapers have a hard time ignoring celebrities as it is. They have an even harder time ignoring celebrities when they say there are enough child prostitutes to fill three Rose Bowls. And sure enough, the shocking figure was reprinted as gospel in



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many major American dailies, including *The New York Times*.

The only problem was that Neilson's scare-stat came from a scientific study that was anything but scientific.

As we reported in the story, the 100,000 to 300,000 figure actually refers to the number of children that two University of Pennsylvania professors consider to be *at risk* for sexual exploitation. Not only that, the study was mostly based on anecdote, not hard data. As one concerned professor told us, "It has no scientific credibility."



□Kutcher and Moore deserve credit for lending their celebrity to a worthy cause. They also deserve credit for hiring a guy like Neilson, who you have to assume they thought would school them on the fundamentals. But that's where the system broke down.

If you're a high-priced consultant, it's your job to get the numbers right. It's not your job to say "I don't frankly care if the number is 200,000, 500,000 or a million or 100,000," as Neilson's wife and co-worker, Maggie, told us.

The consequences of one big, well-intentioned white lie can be grave. Inflated stats like the figure Neilson had Kutcher and Moore cite help explain why there are a glut of government programs which purport to help the cause, yet don't do anything for the actual victims.

Instead, groups like [Shared Hope International](#)--an organization DNA promotes that's run by ex-Washington Congresswoman Linda Smith, who once tried to make "heavy petting" between teenagers a crime--get paid handsomely to coordinate awareness campaigns, while zero dollars are directed towards concrete solutions, like shelters and counseling. (For that kind of assistance, you have to look elsewhere, like this [Senate bill](#) that both we and Kutcher support.)

Instead of acknowledging the bogus stats and the damage they're causing, however, Neilson has spent the bulk of his time since Wednesday, the day the piece came out, on Twitter, trying to

The piece that has Neilson so upset.

"expose" *Seattle Weekly's* connection to Backpage.com, an online classifieds site that, like this paper, is owned by Village Voice Media.

In no fewer than [100 Tweets](#) (there's no way we're actually going to count them all), Neilson has contacted nearly every major media outlet and elected official in the Pacific Northwest in an effort to get them to report on our connection with Backpage. Mayor McGinn was one of those elected officials, and at today's press conference he said Neilson's Tweet prompted him to call Police Chief John Diaz, to, in his words, "see if this was a problem."

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Diaz came back with a number: four. That's how many underage girls who've been linked to Backpage have been recovered so far this year by the Seattle Police Department.

Four is obviously four too many. And we welcome McGinn's invitation to improve the ways in which Backpage and the police department can work together to catch those exploiting vulnerable kids--a task we've been working on for some time now.

Backpage is based in Arizona, and has a staff of 123, most of whom are there to screen every adult or personal ad. When one of those employees sees an ad that looks suspect, they alert the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#), who then call local law enforcement. (For context, this daisy chain of aggressive reporting happened 230 times just last month.)

What happens next often involves a subpoena, which Backpage aims to turn around in a matter of hours, not days. In fact, at today's press conference, Lt. Eric Sano of the Vice/High Risk Victims Unit went out of his way to praise how "very quick and very cooperative" Backpage is in assisting his department. He also added that because Backpage requires a valid credit card--an easily traceable piece of evidence--making sex-trafficking cases off of Backpage is a lot easier than it is on other sites.

Neilson, presumably, knows none of this. Though he might have if he'd bothered to call Carl Ferrer, the man who runs Backpage (and who also travels from city to city, having the kinds of sit-downs with local law enforcement that McGinn requested).

Maybe Neilson will pass on this new information to Kutcher, his client, along with the fact that Backpage has tried to get an audience with the star for months. But judging by the way Neilson has handled facts in the past, we're not holding our breath.

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