

Wikipedia shuts down to protest censorship bills

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Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, is shutting down for 24 hours today to protest internet censorship bills currently being considered by the US Congress.

The Wikipedia Foundation announced its plan to make the English-language Wikipedia “go dark” in a press release posted on its site Monday. The move will coincide with similar actions by a number of sites, including Reddit, the link sharing site, and BoingBoing, a technology blog.

The protest is aimed against two bills, the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), currently under consideration in the US House of Representatives, and its counterpart in the Senate, the Protect IP Act (PIPA). The laws would increase the government’s power over the Internet and its ability to shut down sites in the name of enforcing copyright law. They have strong support from both Democrats and Republicans

“If passed, this legislation will harm the free and open Internet and bring about new tools for censorship of international websites inside the United States,” the Wikimedia foundation, Wikipedia’s parent organization, said in its statement Monday.

The bills would give the US government and major corporations the power to shut down access to web sites on the basis of court orders sought by the office of the Attorney General, which is subordinate to the White House. The court orders would force other companies, including search engines, to halt financial transactions and disable any links to the relevant sites.

In their current forms, the bills would allow sites to be removed from domain name registrars (which connect Internet addresses such as www.google.com with particular computer servers) and be blocked by Internet service providers.

The laws would allow the government to prosecute the owners of websites that link to any site providing

copyrighted material, including search engines. They would also encourage web hosts and payment providers to extra-judicially blacklist websites they suspect of providing copyrighted content.

The bills’ main supporters include the film industry, major television networks including NBC and Viacom, book publishers such as Penguin and McGraw-Hill, and major record labels. They are also supported by a bevy of huge corporations, including 3M and Ford Motor Company. The AFL-CIO and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers are also prominent supporters.

The measures, meanwhile, have been opposed by internet content distribution companies, including Twitter, Facebook, and Google, as well as makers of consumer electronics represented by the Consumer Electronics Association.

In a letter to Congress on December 14, the founders of several major technology companies presented a blunt assessment of the bills, saying that they would “deny website owners the right to due process of law,” and “give the US Government the power to censor the web using techniques similar to those used by China, Malaysia and Iran.”

“There are dangerous provisions in this bill for the health and safety of the Internet. It’s not that the Internet won’t survive, but we won’t like what it becomes,” said Mike McGeary, co-founder and director of Engine Advocacy, in a telephone interview.

In a post on its official blog, Reddit, the link sharing site, noted, “If the Attorney General served Reddit with an order to remove links to a domain, we would be required to scrub every post and comment on the site containing the domain and censor the links out, even if the specific link contained no infringing content. We would also need to implement a system to

automatically censor the domain from any future posts or comments.”

The White House responded Saturday to the public outcry against the laws with a statement intended to mollify opposition, while in reality supporting the core provisions of the bills. The statement said that the White House “calls on all sides to work together to pass sound legislation this year that provides prosecutors and rights holders new legal tools to combat online piracy originating beyond U.S. borders.”

Sue Gardner, executive director of the Wikipedia Foundation, responded to the White House’s post with a note saying, “the reality is that we don’t think SOPA is going away, and PIPA is still quite active.”

She added, “SOPA and PIPA are just indicators of a much broader problem. All around the world, we’re seeing the development of legislation intended to fight online piracy, and regulate the Internet in other ways that hurt online freedoms.”

Public criticism of the bill has broken down along distinct lines. Sections of industry have come out in opposition to the bills not for their impact on free speech, but because of their affect on commerce.

In response to concerns of some technology companies, the bill’s sponsors announced last week that they would consider withdrawing the portions of the bill that would force DNS providers to blacklist servers, although the provision remains in the current version of the bill.

Technology firms, meanwhile, have come out against the bills on the grounds that it would stifle innovation in their field, requiring startups to incur greater legal costs and devote significant additional resources to policing links to other sites.

The clampdown on Internet users’ rights to view content—copyrighted or otherwise—is only the immediate form of a much broader attack on democratic rights. The ruling class in the US and internationally is deeply concerned about the way in which the Internet allows for the rapid dissemination of information.

The bills were announced one year after the release of secret diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks detailing flagrant violations of international law and human rights by the United States government. The Obama administration has led a campaign against WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange, which has included

pressures on corporations to block access to the organization’s web site and shut down its ability to raise funds.

The SOPA and PIPA bills have strong support from both Democrats and Republicans. In the Democratically-controlled Senate, PIPA was introduced by Democratic Party Senator Patrick Leahy, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has campaigned against delaying the vote on the measure.

The growing outcry over the bills prompted six Republican Senators to issue a letter to Reid asking for discussion on the bill to be postponed indefinitely.

“This is an issue that is too important to delay,” Reid wrote in response, and insisted that the PIPA bill come to a vote on January 24.



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