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The Wikipedia blackout: A reminder we shouldn't take internet freedom for granted

- **By [Patrick Hayes](#)**
- [Notebook](#), [Opinion](#)
- Wednesday, 18 January 2012 at 4:14 pm

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It's striking how you can take things for granted online. Since the Wikipedia blackout commenced, I have already hit its holding page well over 20 times while googling certain topics. I know I'm not alone – it's been [estimated](#) that about 75 million people worldwide will be affected by the blackout today.

Despite this irritant, however, I think we should all lend our support to the protest, seeing the blackout as a dramatic snapshot of what could happen far more often, should the trend towards ever-increasing regulation online continue.

In some quarters the protest has been met with sneering: 'Where will we go for our unreliable info now?', joked a news outlet in what's proven a popular tweet. Some other online organisations have declined to join in the protest, with Twitter CEO Dick Costolo [arguing](#): 'That's just silly. Closing a global business in reaction to a single-issue national politics is foolish'.

While he has since qualified this statement somewhat, given Costolo's [proud declaration](#) that Twitter is 'the free speech wing of the free speech party', he should evidently take another look at the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), currently going through the House of Representatives, and the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA), shortly to be voted on in the US Senate.

These, as the campaign group Electronic Frontier Foundation [points out](#), include rules that would force internet companies to have to police their own sites to ensure there are no copyright infringements – something that could mean fundamental changes need to be made to Web 2.0 sites with user generated content, like Wikipedia, Twitter and YouTube – expanded state powers to block domain name services for 'rogue sites' and the implementation of a 'vigilante provision'. This provision would grant immunity to service providers on the condition they agree to self-regulate, which [could create](#) 'a vehicle for corporations to censor sites—even those in the US —without any legal oversight'.

This is also far from being an issue that would just affect US websites and citizens: serious concerns have been raised that the SOPA bill [would](#) 'authorise the US Department of Justice to seek court orders against websites outside US jurisdiction'. Sites from outside the US could be banned from being listed on Google and other search engines in the US and payment websites like PayPal would have to refuse their services.

All this adds up to a worrying situation where the US state could have massively increased powers to shut down websites that it in some way deems to be 'rogue'. White House [assurances](#) that it will not approve the most worrying aspects of these bills have failed to allay fears and, with the PIPA bill due to be voted on in the Senate on January 24, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales – alongside the Wikipedia community and supporters – is right to keep the pressure on by taking a stand. As he [argues](#), 'while we regret having to prevent the world from having access to Wikipedia for even a second, we simply cannot ignore the fact that SOPA and PIPA endanger free speech both in the United States and abroad, and set a frightening

precedent of Internet censorship for the world'.

It should be remembered, of course, that it's far from simply being lawmakers who are denigrating freedom online. Many online activists – from trade unions to 'child-friendly' campaign groups and anti-porn feminists – have their own areas of the web containing 'offensive' content they'd personally like to see blacked out. And by generating 'twitter storms' and online petitions, they can often use social media to rather censorious ends.

Furthermore, it's not simply a case of the Silicon Valley freedom fighters against The Man. Many of the websites arguing against the anti-piracy laws in the US simply have their own corporate and financial agendas in mind. Indeed some, like link-sharing site Reddit which is protesting today, can also be deeply illiberal themselves when it comes to shutting down websites they disapprove of. As Nathalie Rothschild has pointed out on spiked, Reddit, one of sites protesting, 'led a boycott against the domain registrar Go Daddy for supporting SOPA and then decided to try and unseat a member of Congress who supports the bill. Reddit users picked out Congressman Paul Ryan – but, as it turned out, Ryan had not actually come out in support of SOPA.'

Equally, Wikipedia is hardly doing itself any favours when it comes to drumming up solidarity for its actions, with executive director Sue Gardner taking a somewhat pretentious approach when she says: 'Wikipedia's heart is in the right place. It's not aiming to monetize their eyeballs or make them believe some particular thing, or sell them a product. Wikipedia has no hidden agenda: it just wants to be helpful. That's less true of other sites. Most are commercially motivated: their purpose is to make money.'

But you don't need to be a holier-than-thou Wikipedia advocate to support its protest. You don't even have to value the site and its 'unreliable info'. Nor do you need to be a fervent supporter of the abolition of all copyright laws (certainly I'm not).

The Wikipedia blackout is a timely example of what could happen if some of an authoritarian bent – be it the state, censorious online activists or others – get their way. It should serve as a reminder that we should not take the freedoms and services currently existing online for granted, and that it's important to take a stand now to ensure blackouts of a more involuntary nature don't become a regular fixture in future.

Tagged in: wikipedia, wikipedia blackout

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> **Farweasel** > whosaysso · a year ago
> .... Neither of which are all that greatly valued by either the Radical Right or the self-seeking proponents of that
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flinglish · a year ago
If anything this 'wiki blackout' demonstrates an over reliance on the internet. Id like to see no internet for a day, it would be
absolute chaos in the west. The internet is ruining an innumerable amount of things and to be frank is turning many of us into
sedentary beings, myself partly included, as well as destroying real social networks and livelihoods to name a couple.
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> **ChristopherVonbrincken** > flinglish · a year ago
> We should have stayed on the trees. Um. I mean in the water.
>
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> > Well said Christopher, my thoughts exactly.
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> **igotbannedbanned** > flinglish · a year ago
> How about no antibiotics day too
>
> Idiot
>
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Shane Melvin · a year ago
Belv not all americans are self centred, arrogant and stupid that's just you being ignorant if anyone fits this description it's
you stop give us brits a bad name..
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Farweasel · a year ago
The difference between Twitter's shallow & expedient position and Wikipedia's ethical & mature stand echoes quite
accurately the relative value of the 2 facilities.

Frankly, who would care a Rat's arse if Twitter vanished - other than the vain and the insecure?
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wifione · a year ago
Brilliant post! But the point is, the blackout is a symbolic event. We need the community and civil society to contact their
legislators to protest the bills. If that is done, only then can this blackout be successful.
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Rene Descartes · a year ago
The UK has shut down America for the copyright infringement known as
'American English' Her Majesty's government will be with you shortly.

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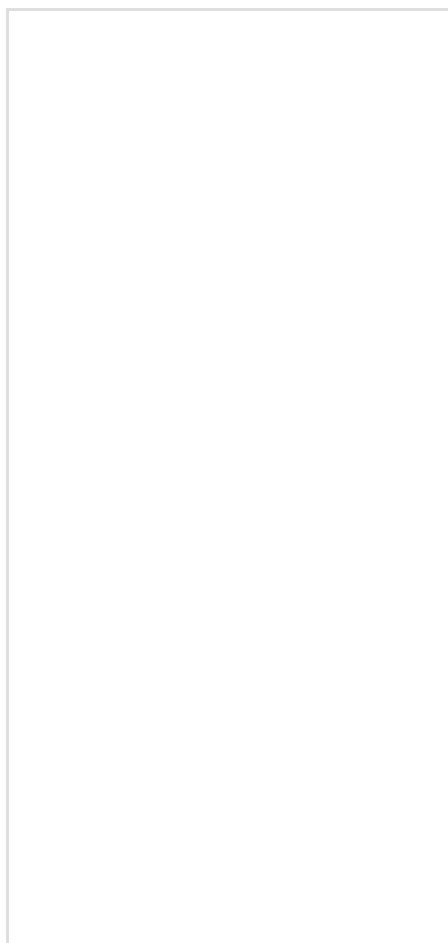
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