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Why is Wikipedia offline and what is SOPA?



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Wikipedia will be offline until 12:00 a.m. ET Thursday.

Wikipedia

Need to know about the Wikipedia blackout? In this [occasional feature](#), the National Post tells you everything you need to know about the a complicated issue. Beginning midnight Wednesday, crowd-sourced knowledge database Wikipedia went dark and will be offline for 24 hours as a protest against proposed anti-piracy legislation in the United States. We give you the inside scoop on why the sixth most popular website on the planet has decided to turn itself off for a day and how you can access its pages even though it is offline.

Lost without Wikipedia? The National Post's got you covered. Steve Murray answers your fact-finding inquiries right now at [natpo.st/postipedia](#)

How long will the site be blacked out?

The blackout started at 12:00 a.m. eastern time (5:00 a.m. GMT) on Wednesday morning and will last until 12:00 a.m. eastern time on Thursday (also 5:00 a.m. GMT).

What exactly is blacked out?

The English-language version of Wikipedia is offline and has been replaced with a message related to the anti-piracy legislation going through Congress, SOPA, in the United States. Other language editions of Wikipedia will be unaffected.

Additionally, popular community website [Reddit](#) has also gone offline, as well as Boing-Boing and several smaller websites.

WordPress is suggesting users black out their own websites, but is not forcing any blackouts. Google is also staging a homepage protest (see image below).

Whoa, SOPA? What the heck is that?

SOPA, which stands for the Stop Online Piracy Act, is a piece of legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives. The act is designed to target copyright infringers online through a series of harsh penalties.

In the U.S. Senate, a separate companion bill is called the Protect Intellectual Property Act or PIPA.

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[Profile: Wikipedia's Sue Gardner](#)

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What are the battle lines in the debate?

The fight over SOPA is generally seen as a major clash between Hollywood and old media, and Silicon Valley. The backers of the legislation include the Motion Picture Association of America (the MPAA), the major movie studios and television networks, most major book publishers and several ISPs. They say that without the legislation at least [2.2 million industry jobs would be at risk](#).

A large number of Internet content companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo! and several others have publicly come out against the legislation. Certain companies, such as Google, have spent a great deal on lobbying against they bill. They say the legislation would turn the Internet into a police state.

Read more on efforts to change the proposed legislation:

[‘Three key section of the existing legislation seem likely to remain, a person familiar with the matter says. They comprise provisions aimed at getting search engines to disable links to foreign infringing sites; provisions that cut off advertising services to those sites; and provisions that cut off payment processing.](#)

[‘But critical provisions that would require Internet service providers such as Verizon Communications and Comcast Corp. to cut off infringing sites through a technology known as DNS blocking are now likely to be eliminated’](#)

2.2 million jobs sound like a lot. Why do the SOPA opponents say it would turn the Internet into a police state?

Several of the provisions in SOPA force American Internet service providers or ISPs hosting websites to remove a site from the Internet if there's a claim it's infringing against copyright, even if it has not been fully proved in court. The argument is that this would make it easy for someone to make false or weak claims to take a website offline while the case makes its way through the courts.

Additionally, it would force ISPs to block non-U.S. websites accused of having infringing material, meaning sites from other countries might not be available in the United States. Opponents say this might destabilize the Internet and allow loopholes for hackers to exploit.

Which sites that I use would this affect?

Most obviously, Wikipedia. There are millions of users who constantly update the site, and sometimes things are posted that might have questionable copyright provenance. If Wikipedia were shut down or blocked every time it was challenged over copyright, the site would likely cease to function.

YouTube would be another site that would be harshly affected by the measures. Since millions of people upload videos to YouTube, sometimes copyrighted material slips through. Currently, this is dealt with by individual videos being taken down after a complaint. Google has stated YouTube probably wouldn't exist if a SOPA-like law had been in effect in 2004 when the site launched.

Some interpretations of the bill say that sites that even link to other sites accused of infringing might be at risk.

Basically, any site that has a large user-generated component is worried about SOPA. [This is the document](#) Wikipedia references when explaining why they are against the bill.

How can I get around the blackout?

If you do a Google search for a Wikipedia page, you should be offered the option to use a "Google Cache" version of the page. This is a past

Doesn't the blackout hurt Wikipedia's reputation as a neutral source of information?

Possibly. On [its page explaining the blackout](#), Wikimedia Foundation Executive Director Sue Gardner had these words: "In making this decision, Wikipedians will be criticized for seeming to abandon neutrality to take a political position. That's a real, legitimate issue. We want people to trust Wikipedia, not worry that it is trying to propagandize them. But although Wikipedia's articles are neutral, its existence is not." Read more about Sue Gardner in a [profile on the Canadian-born Wikipedia executive from FP magazine](#).

Why aren't Google and Facebook blacking out like Wikipedia?

Unlike Wikipedia, which is a not-for-profit, Google and Facebook have a huge number of shareholders to appease.

Google has, however, altered its home and search pages to alert people to the blackout day. This change is only visible in the United States. You can see the company's altered home page on the right and you can read their argument [here](#).




This is what Google's home page looks like in the United States. Brian Fitzpatrick/Google+

This all sounds pretty bad, why are so many people for it?

The argument is best summed up by News Corp. CEO Rupert Murdoch as posted on Twitter:

"Piracy leader is Google who streams movies free, sells advts around them. No wonder pouring millions into lobbying."



Rupert Murdoch
@rupertmurdoch Follow

Piracy leader is Google who streams movies free, sells advts around them. No wonder pouring millions into lobbying.

10:54 PM - 14 Jan 12

746 RETWEETS 85 FAVORITES

Additionally, Robert Bennett, a senior research fellow at a technology think tank and whose work both SOPA and PIPA are based on, [told the San Francisco Chronicle](#) that "The critics either don't understand what the bills do or are misrepresenting what the bills do." Bennett further stated that the bills wouldn't be as far-reaching or sweeping as critics state.

Read more on Sue Gardner, Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation:

'One of Gardner's initial priorities after taking control of the foundation was identifying the best ways for the organization to sustain growth. At the time, Wikimedia was operating with a staff of just seven people on a shoestring budget of about \$1 million. Among her first tasks was helping the foundation move in 2007 from St. Petersburg, Fla., to San Francisco, where it would be in close proximity to the bright minds — and big wallets — of Silicon Valley'

What does the White House have to say about this?

The White House released a [statement on the legislation](#) coming out against it, a key point of which was the quote: "We must avoid creating new cybersecurity risks or disrupting the underlying architecture of the Internet."

However, President Barack Obama has not specifically come out and said that he would veto the bill if it came across his desk.

It sounds like people could use this legislation to simply black out speech they don't like.

It isn't that extreme. A complainant would still need to get a court order to shut the site down.

Still ... wouldn't that be unconstitutional?

This argument isn't a new one. In fact, the *Stanford Law Review* posted an article in late December [basically saying that the entire thing was unconstitutional](#). Regardless of if the legislation would be struck down in the Supreme Court (and that isn't certain), it would likely take years to push it through the system.

Hasn't the legislation been blocked already?

Support for the bill has fallen through in the House and Senate, and Eric Cantor has stopped work on the bill in the House. While this effectively kills the current iteration of SOPA and PIPA, the bill is still being worked on by its proponents, who wrote a letter to the Senate majority leader asking to keep the [bill going](#). You can read about how the bill is being reformed on the [FP Tech Desk](#).



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alexinfinite • a year ago

The media industry complained about 8 track tapes, video cassettes, records, tapes, VCRs, downloadable music and god knows what else every time something new comes along to shake up an unreasonable monopoly. Passing this bill would cause more harm than good. Don't believe me? Look at the success of Itunes and Netflix. I am so sick of these short sighted industries complaining. They resisted downloadable music for god's sake, and that rakes in millions!

54 ▲ ▾ • Share >



Mashiki > alexinfinite • a year ago

Let's not forget they've already got a pile of legislation to turn around and 'fight' piracy(DMCA, ACTA, Pro-IP). This is all about them trying to become the new gatekeepers of media, and keep their grip over everything.

2 ▲ ▾ • Share >



Anonymous66 • a year ago

If Rupert Murdoch is in favour of the legislation, it must be bad.

He's got a lot of nerve lecturing Google on morality.

51 ▲ ▾ • Share >

Ivanhoe5 • a year ago

So what it is really about is protecting the fat cheques of corporate America and the very famous. It has gotten ridiculous when you cannot post on line your kids Christmas party because jingle bells rock was played in the background. This is idiocy when we become a police state to protect profits for an artist that has been dead for decades and the only ones who profit are wealthy corporations that pay massive bonuses to their CEO's and ship our jobs overseas.

36 ▲ ▾ • Share >

Wayne Workman > Ivanhoe5 • a year ago

I completely agree.

1 ▲ ▾ • Share >

Justin D.T.G. • a year ago

How is it that the United States can impose a law on the WORLD WIDE web? they should have no right to make laws for the internet, it should be outside their jurisdiction.

29 ▲ ▾ • Share >

Muqim > Justin D.T.G. • a year ago

Knowledge is like light that no one can stop it. We are in the era of human civilization that knowledge would be available to everyone anytime

6 ▲ ▾ • Share >

Moe45673 > Justin D.T.G. • a year ago

Much of the important internet (Google, Wikipedia) is hosted in the US and thereby subject to American Law. Even the stuff that is not hosted can be blocked to US residents based off this bill, similar to how China blocks content. If the US market was to drop off for a given site (read: Business), that site and everything associated with it would be hurt significantly.

1 ▲ ▾ • Share >

Zoska > Moe45673 • a year ago

I like it! This means that more of internet services will move to other countries. Or even to some "free offshore" countries.

This will improve economic situation in other countries. In fact, I we do not import anything from US. Far east is the heart of new technology and ... simple goods.

BTW, I download movies :)

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