

Wikinews interviews Sue Gardner on Wikipedia blackout

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Sue Gardner, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation.

Image: Ralf Roletschek.



Preparations at the Wikimedia Foundation for the blackout.

Image: Victor Grigas.

Today, the English version of Wikipedia is taking part in a 24-hour 'blackout' to protest two proposed U.S. anti-piracy laws, the Stop Online Piracy Act and the PROTECT IP Act. The protest mirrors similar actions from other websites including Reddit and Boing Boing. The White House stated on Saturday that they "will not support legislation that reduces freedom of expression, increases cybersecurity risk, or undermines the dynamic, innovative global internet".

In the midst of the Wikipedia blackout, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation Sue Gardner answered some questions posed by *Wikinews*' Tom Morris about the effectiveness of, and background to, the blackout.

(((Tom Morris))) Do you think the blackout is going to actually be effective?

(((Sue Gardner))) Yes. In my opinion, the blackout has two main goals—to raise awareness about the dangers of SOPA and PIPA, and to encourage readers to contact their elected representatives and give their views. The first has already been accomplished: there are already more than 4,000 stories in Google News about the blackout, and it was a trending topic on Twitter almost immediately. So we know we've been effective in raising awareness. What remains to be seen how many people will contact their elected officials.

(((TM))) What do you say to people who have decided to leave the editing community as a result of the blackout?

(((Gardner))) I hope nobody stops editing Wikipedia because of the blackout. I watched the community decision-making process unfold on the English Wikipedia, and I thought it was a good one. People first started talking about SOPA more than a month ago. Jimmy started the straw poll in mid-December. Over 1,800 English Wikipedians from many different countries participated in the discussion over the last three days. As the admins who closed it noted, this is by far the largest-ever

number of participants in a community discussion on English Wikipedia, and the overwhelming majority of them supported action. So I would hope that anybody who opposes the blackout would also agree that the decision-making process was a good one, and would therefore be okay to accept it, however reluctantly.

(((TM))) How much technical planning went into the blackout before the community consensus was decided on Monday night?

(((Gardner))) Last Thursday Geoff Brigham [Ed: Wikimedia's legal counsel] asked engineering to do an internal assessment of the technical implementation requirements, because the community discussions at that point were suggesting there would likely be some kind of action. Engineering did an initial assessment based on e.g. the Italian blackout, implications for search engines, etc., and then a lot of work happened over the weekend. The bulk of initial development and testing happened on a sprint on Martin Luther King Day, a public holiday in the United States, and the final launch development and testing sprint happened on Tuesday.

(((TM))) Does the fact that this is affecting only English Wikipedia and not the sister projects and other language projects concern the Foundation?

(((Gardner))) No. My understanding is that the English Wikipedia is the only project and language-version enacting a blackout, but that several other projects and language versions are putting up supportive banners, with the Italian Wikipedians doing a clickthrough informational interstitial. The German Wikipedia decided to put up banners even before consensus was reached on the English Wikipedia, and the Arabic Wikipedia, Italian Wikipedia and Commons later made the same decision. (There may be others, that I don't know about.) I think that's fine: each project and each language has different circumstances that argue for different types of action, or for no action. There is no one right answer that fits everybody.

(((TM))) Some have said that the lack of participation by opponents of SOPA in the commercial sector (sites of the size of Twitter, Facebook, Google etc.) is going to hamper the effectiveness of the blackout - is this a concern?

(((Gardner))) No. I don't think anybody ever expected the big commercial sites to black out: most aren't in a position to participate in something like this even if they wanted to. For example, they might have shareholders to answer to, participation might cost them significant revenue, or it could break contractual agreements (such as a commitment to maintain a certain level of uptime, or some other service delivery). Most sites are constrained by various commercial considerations: that makes Wikipedia's participation particularly powerful and important.

(((TM))) Given both the Italian shutdown and the SOPA blackout, is the Foundation going to come up with a policy or set of conditions which limit when these kind of things happen? There are plenty in the community who support the SOPA actions but are concerned that this will set a bad precedent.

(((Gardner))) Yeah, I empathize with those people and to a certain extent I share that concern. The Wikimedia movement does not have a lot of experience with advocacy, and probably mistakes will get made. At this time the Wikimedia Foundation doesn't have

any plans to develop policy governing protests or advocacy work. But, I think it probably does make sense for the Foundation to create venues for these discussions so people can share thinking and expertise. So for example, we may create a mailing list dedicated to advocacy/lobbying. And there is some good thinking starting to happen [on the project-wide protests page on Meta].

Related news

- "Wikipedia, Reddit in 'blackout' against SOPA, PROTECT IP laws" — *Wikinews*, January 17, 2012
- "Sue Gardner appointed as Wikimedia Foundation Executive Director" — *Wikinews*, November 29, 2007
- "Interview with Sue Gardner of the Wikimedia Foundation" — *Wikinews*, October 24, 2007

Sources

- "Wikipedia to shut down for 24 hours (<http://www.news24.com/SciTech/News/Wikipedia-to-shut-down-for-24-hours-20120117>) " — *News24*, January 17, 2012
- "Wikipedia joins web blackout in Sopa protest (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-16590585>) " — *BBC News*, January 17, 2012

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