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The New Statesman's rolling politics blog



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Wikipedia 24-hour blackout: a reader

The who, what and why of Wikipedia's plan to shut down in protest of anti-piracy legislation.

BY [ALICE GRIBBIN](#) | PUBLISHED 17 JANUARY 2012 12:49



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Q: What is happening?

A: [Wikipedia](#), the free online encyclopedia, will blackout its English version website to all global readers for 24-hours from tomorrow (18 January). On Monday 16 January, the non-profit, 501(c)(3) charity that operates Wikipedia -- the Wikimedia Foundation -- issued a [press release](#) announcing that 1,800 members of the Wikipedia community had together reached the "unprecedented decision" to temporarily shutdown the site after 72 hours of consultation. Sue Gardner, Executive Director of the Wikimedia Foundation, also released a [statement](#).

Wikipedia attracts 25 million global visitors a day, is available in 282 language versions, and contains over 20 million articles created, contributed to and edited by an international community of 100,000-plus volunteers. According to comScore, Wikipedia and its [sister sites](#) receive over 474 million unique visitors each month. As of January 2012, Wikipedia is ranked the 6th most popular website in the world by [Alexa Internet](#). The Wikimedia Foundation is based in San Francisco, California, and its Chairman Emeritus and co-founder is [Jimmy Wales](#).

Q: When is it happening?

A: Wikipedia's English-language site will be unavailable from 05:00 GMT on Wednesday 18 January. That's 5am Wednesday morning in the UK; Midnight Tuesday/Wednesday on the US east coast (Wednesday 00:00 EST); 9pm Tuesday evening on the US west coast (Tuesday 21:00 PST). The website is expected to return to its usual operations after exactly 24 hours.

Q: Why is it happening?

A: In October 2011, a bill called the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) was introduced to the US House of Representatives, following the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) bill introduced to the US Senate in May.

The two bills propose laws that would expand the ability of copyright holders -- along with law enforcement, the US Department of Justice -- to fight online trafficking in copyrighted intellectual property and counterfeit goods through court orders. Depending on who had made the request, court orders could include:

- Bars on search engines from linking to websites "accused of enabling or facilitating copyright infringement"
- Bars on online advertising networks and payment facilitators -- e.g. PayPal -- from doing business with accused websites
- Forced blocking by internet service providers of access to accused websites

The Stop Online Piracy Act would also make unauthorized streaming of copyrighted content a crime, with a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

The SOPA bill is currently being debated by the House Judiciary Committee and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has scheduled a vote on the PIPA legislation for 24 January.

The Wikipedia Foundation stated that the "overwhelming majority" of its participants were behind action that would encourage the public to respond to the Senate and Congress bills. It said that "Wikipedians around the world, not just from within the United States" showed broad-based support for action; "that roughly 55 per cent of those supporting a blackout preferred that it be a global one, with many pointing to concerns about similar legislation in other nations." Addressing the



political dimension of the decision to act, the Wikipedia Foundation said:

Although Wikipedia's articles are neutral, its existence is not . . . Wikimedia projects are organizing and summarizing and collecting the world's knowledge . . . But that knowledge has to be published somewhere for anyone to find and use it. Where it can be censored without due process, it hurts the speaker, the public, and Wikimedia . . . We believe in a free and open Internet where information can be shared without impediment. We believe that new proposed laws like SOPA -- and PIPA, and other similar laws under discussion inside and outside the United States -- don't advance the interests of the general public.

The blackout by Wikipedia co-incides with similar action by other websites, and goes ahead despite signals by the Obama administration that it was aiming to make changes to anti-piracy legislation. In [a statement](#) last weekend, three White House officials wrote:

While we believe that online piracy by foreign websites is a serious problem that requires a serious legislative response, we will not support legislation that reduces freedom of expression, increases cybersecurity risk or undermines the dynamic, innovative global Internet.

In a statement from Wikimedia UK, chair of the UK chapter Roger Bamkin explained why British users would be affected by tomorrow's shutdown of English language pages:

Wikimedia UK is the UK chapter of the Wikimedia Foundation. We regard the SOPA and PIPA legislation in the United States as a threat to the current operation of Wikipedia. This could also affect Wikimedia's other projects operated under U.S. law.

The members of the Wikipedia community have been balloted to determine whether they wish to blackout Wikipedia on Wednesday and agreed that this should happen.

Wikimedia UK is an independent British charity that defends the decision of our membership.

Q: Who is supporting Wikipedia's decision?

A: Wikipedia is urging all of its readers around the globe to speak up on SOPA and PIPA: their press releases have invited US residents to visit the [following website](#) and contact their elected representatives in Washington; non-US readers are urged to express their opposition to the bills to their own State Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs or relevant branch of government.

Jimmy Wales has repeated the call today on Twitter -- [@jimmy_wales](#):

All US Citizens: **#WikipediaBlackout** means nothing unless you call your Senators. Do it now! Give friends the number too!

Twitter:

Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed, MLK. On Wednesday, Wikipedia demands

and Sport Select Committee member [Tom Watson](#) took to the social networking site to show his support -- [@tomwatson](#):

I'm with [@jimmy_wales](#) on SOPA (it would affect Britain), <http://bit.ly/wd2zXI> Worth letting Twitter boss [@dickc](#) know your views

sentiment with his 3.7m Twitter followers -- [@stephenfry](#):

Good for Wikipedia. Ashamed to work in an industry many of whose leaders have tried to push this revolting law through.

site; [Boing Boing](#), the zine-turned-group blog; and [Cheezburger](#), the network of comedy image blogs. Wikipedia lists as other participants: A Softer World, Cake Wrecks, Destructoid, dotSUB, Free Press, Good.is, Good Old Games, little-apps.org, Mojang, MoveOn.org, Mozilla, Rage Maker, stfuConservatives.net, The Leaky Wiki, This is Why I'm Broke, Tucows and TwitPic.

Co-inciding with Martin Luther King Jr. Day, yesterday Wales quoted the civil rights leader on

Deputy Chair of the Labour Party and Culture, Media

Actor and technology enthusiast Stephen Fry shared the

Other websites taking similar action to Wikipedia include [Reddit](#), the user-generated social news

Q: Who is against the protest?

A: Among the groups driving the legislation, the Motion Picture Association of America has come out in defence of the bill. MPAA's executive leading the legislation campaign, Michael O'Leary, called the action of Wikipedia and others "gimmicks and distortion," and told the *LA Times*:

It's part and parcel of a campaign to distract from the real issue here and to draw people away from trying to resolve what is a real problem, which is that foreigners continue to steal the hard work of Americans.

Twitter has declined to participate in the blackout. Twitter CEO Dick Costolo made his thoughts on the protest clear when replying to queries from US technology journalists -- [@dickc](#):

He elaborated in further tweets:
In December, Rupert

[@digiphile](#) [@jayrosen_nyu](#) that's just silly. Closing a global business in reaction to single-issue national politics is foolish.

[@digiphile](#) Not shutting down a service doesn't equal not taking the proper stance on an issue. We've been very clear about our stance . . . We have been very active and will continue to be very active. Watch this space.

Murdoch **appeared before Congress** to lend his support to the two anti-piracy bills. Following the White House statement referring to freedom of expression, the News Corporation CEO tweeted last weekend -- [@RupertMurdoch](#):

Read more about the SOPA protest at [sopastrike.com](#) and [take action here](#).

So Obama has thrown in his lot with Silicon Valley paymasters who threaten all software creators with piracy, plain thievery. -

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TUE, 2012-01-17 15:33 — [CHARLESFRITH](#)

The New Statesman needs to man up and stop doing scatter journalism. Pick some issues and fight.



WED, 2012-01-18 11:07 — [ROBERT TAGGART](#)

Supporting Jimmy Wales and Wikipedia.

But, what counselling will they be giving to all those full-time, uber-nerdy, self-appointed, saddo guardians of this site ? Know who one means ?...

Favonian,Malleus fatourum, MusiMike, Nev1...!



TUE, 2012-01-17 13:11 — DES DEMONA (NOT VERIFIED)

"We believe that new proposed laws like SOPA -- and PIPA, and other similar laws under discussion inside and outside the United States -- don't advance the interests of the general public."

An interesting point. But the logical extension of that is that copyright is a thing of the past and that authors, film makers etc have to take their chances that enough people won't access their material for free so that they can get some recompense for their work. if they can't then why bother? And I can't see how that is in the interests of the general public.

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