SOPA -- What It Is and Why It's Bad

By Sally Kohn
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SOPA stands for the Stop Internet Piracy Act. But it could stand for... Something On (which) Progressives (and Conservatives) Agree.

Basically, SOPA is a Pandora's box of proposed regulations that would inadvertently make it easier for our government to censor the Internet. Current laws already allow owners of copyrighted material to get that content removed from unauthorized websites. But SOPA would mean entire sites could be shut down even for minor copyright infractions, a slippery slope that would undermine even good, legal content on the web and allow politically-motivated witch hunts against entire websites.

That wasn't necessarily the original intent of members of Congress who introduced the bill, but they were hoodwinked by big business interests in the Chamber of Commerce and Motion Picture Association of America.

Now advocacy and consumer interest groups from the Cato Institute to the Electronic Frontier Foundation to the MIT Media Lab have come out in full force against SOPA. And today, hundreds of thousands of individuals are joining websites like Wikipedia and the Reddit for #BlackoutSOPA --- blocking their content for a 24 hour period to show the potential disastrous consequences if SOPA is passed into law.

You might not like foreign-based websites like WikiLeaks. Fine. That's a debate worth having.

But it's one thing to use existing legal channels to get unauthorized content removed from WikiLeaks' pages. It's another thing entirely to create new laws that, according to the

Electronic Frontier Foundation, mean businesses and governments could get unopposed court orders to cut off such sites entirely, blocking even their perfectly legal and legitimate content from public view.

In the new era of digital democracy the Internet has promised us, potential censorship through SOPA threatens the values our nation and the net holds dear.

As Adam Smith, the grandfather of modern capitalism himself noted, government safeguards and standards play an invaluable role in protecting a nation's people against the potential overreach or abuse of otherwise-unchecked big business interests. But unfortunately, when our elected officials in both parties rely on Wall Street for campaign cash and big business lobbyists drown out the voices of ordinary citizens, government can be manipulated to give a helping hand to corporations and work against the public interest.

Without question, our nation's Founding Fathers never imagined something the Internet in their wildest dreams, but whether it was freedom of the press or freedom of assembly, they saw government as protecting the American people against things like SOPA, not government being the one to inflict such censorship.

Check out the #blackoutSOPA website at http://www.blackoutsopa.org/ for more information about the dangers of SOPA and tools for how you can participate in the blackout through Facebook and Twitter and contact your representatives in Congress to oppose SOPA and preserve the freedom that America and the Internet is all about.

Sally Kohn is a Fox News Contributor and grassroots strategist. You can find her online at http://sallykohn.com.