



Illuminating blackout

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If you weren't already aware of the U.S. House's Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) or its Senate twin, the Protect IP Act (PIPA), chances are your eyes were opened to the issue Wednesday if you attempted to look something up on Wikipedia, did a Google search, browsed Craigslist or visited one of the many other websites that were protesting the legislation.

It was a blackout.

Those sites either suspended operations (save for a black screen explaining why) for all or part of the day, or made prominent note of the protest (Google placed a black rectangle over its logo that linked to an explanation). It was a clever and effective way to show the public the potential consequences of Congress meddling with the Internet.

SOPA and PIPA are bills aimed at combating the online theft of copyrighted material, such as movies and music. Protecting intellectual property is a valid concern. But as is typical, Congress is using a far too broad, blunt approach to address it.

The legislation would give government — and major entertainment and media corporations — the power to shut down entire websites, without a court hearing, simply because they might contain one item that violates copyright law. A site doesn't have to be designed for the purpose of copyright violation (such as the old Napster program), it only has to be able to be used for copyright violation. That can include Facebook and YouTube. Lawful content would be blocked right along with the bad.

The Cato Institute's Jim Harper likens this to cutting off the phone lines to an entire building because some of its tenants used the phone to plot thefts or fraud. It's therefore easy to understand why so many websites staged the blackout Wednesday to protest the bills.

SOPA and PIPA would concentrate too much power into too few hands — politically connected hands. It's a recipe for dumb, ill-informed action, as well as politically motivated abuse. Furthermore, because it holds website operators responsible for every byte of information they host, it will force sites to screen all content. That will increase costs to comply with the law, slow operations and discourage smaller sites from setting up on the 'Net.

That is antithetical to what has made the Internet a transformational economic and social success — its speed, its accessibility and its freedom. It has flourished precisely because it's not regulated by government.

Finally, many tech experts believe SOPA and PIPA wouldn't even be effective at combating online piracy. So you have the potential of a lumbering government-corporate complex clumsily whacking websites, or at least cowing them into submission, without actually solving the problem.

That is so Washington.

The good news is, SOPA and PIPA are losing support. President Obama has announced his opposition, and Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, the sponsor of SOPA, postponed action on the bill originally scheduled for

Wednesday (hence the chosen date for the blackout). The Senate, though, is still slated to take up PIPA on Jan. 24.

However, PIPA on Wednesday lost a major co-sponsor: Florida's Marco Rubio, who said he was withdrawing his support in response to the concerns raised by critics. Rep. Steve Southerland, R-Panama City, also said Wednesday that he opposed the current legislation.

Kudos to them, and to the websites that used a blackout to shed light on an important matter of freedom.