

Online outrage - *In our view*

Did you miss Wikipedia?

The online encyclopedia took itself off the Internet Wednesday as a way to protest two bills -- the Stop Online Piracy Act and the Protect IP Act -- that technology companies believe would raise costs, stifle creativity and lead to censorship.

The bills are designed to halt websites from illegally downloading music and movies -- properties that are protected by copyright. That has become a big problem for media companies that discover their products have been made available for free by some websites.

Companies as diverse as Disney, News Corp., Viacom and the NFL have lobbied to create legislation to protect their copyrighted interests.

That has led to a backlash by Internet companies that see the legislation as overly broad and a threat to their existence. Google, AOL, Yahoo and others sent a joint letter to Congress opposing the legislation.

Congress is right to attempt to address the problem. Internet piracy is said to be a \$58 billion industry. It is against the law for U.S. websites to steal or sell stolen property. Sponsors of the legislation contend the bills are aimed at foreign websites that illegally steal the material and make it available,

The problem is that this material is often made available on foreign websites that link to U.S. search engines. Web giants such as Google or Yahoo or YouTube have thousands of links. The legislation would force those companies to drop the links, halt advertisements and payments to those links or block the content that is in dispute.

Technology companies claim the legislation is vague and unnecessarily broad. They contend the current structure, in which pirated material is removed when they are alerted to it, is sufficient. They worry that failure to monitor a single illegal offering on a link could lead the U.S. attorney general to shut down the entire website.

Part of the dilemma is that Congress crafted the legislation with the help of the media company lobbyists and largely at the exclusion of Internet firms.

Millions of Internet users have responded to SOPA and PIPA by emailing and texting members of Congress. The bills, which were supposed to be voted on this week, now have been moved back.

No one questions the need to crack down on online piracy. Indeed, Google's chairman Eric Schmidt is on record as having said that Congress' goal is reasonable. But, he added, "their mechanism is terrible."

If nothing else, SOPA and PIPA have raised awareness about the need to craft specific laws with specific language that will protect copyrighted material while allowing the Internet to function freely.

That requires all stakeholders -- not just the entertainment industries -- to have a hand in crafting the legislation.