U.S. Legislation Could Shut Down the Internet
Written by Luke M. Herrington

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The internet industry, bloggers, news outlets, political advocacy organizations, and individuals all over the United States are crying out in an effort to stop Congress from approving two potentially very dangerous pieces of legislation: the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), and the PROTECT Intellectual Property Act (PIPA). Both pieces of legislation attempt to address the very real issue of internet piracy. Online pirates regularly steal intellectual property, including movies, music, and television episodes.

Organizations, like Viacom and the Motion Picture Association of America, are dependent on their copyrights. As such, they have lined up behind SOPA and PIPA.

A number of politicians, too, have joined the raucous, possibly in a veiled assault on the People's Republic of China—a haven of pirated merchandise. The Chinese government has promised for sometime to improve its protections of intellectual property, patents, and trademarks. In many ways things only get worse, as Chinese firms steal trade secrets—a move likely sanctioned by a government seeking to maintain its economic growth rates.

Regardless of the intentions of the legislation, companies like Google, Twitter, Wikipedia, Facebook, and e-Bay, have joined in a chorus calling for the demise of the legislation. They argue that its regulations are far too cumbersome, and that it would undermine the vitality and innovation of the internet industry and Silicon Valley. In an e-mail sent out today, Democracy for America (DFA), a progressive political action group based in Vermont, also criticized this legislation. Jase Roberts, the technology director for DFA, argues that "[t]aken to an extreme, this type of legislation could result in political bloggers, news outlets, and even organizations like DFA being silenced because the powers that be don't like [their] message[s]" (his emphasis). Many of these organizations are temporarily blacking out service. Users will be unable to access Wikipedia, for instance, until the protest ends.

Still, many are worried that these pieces of legislation could turn the United States into China, which employees thousands of censors to monitor the internet.

Even academic websites—which might normally be protected by academic freedom—like e-IR could be impacted by this legislation. SOPA and PIPA require organizations like *e-IR Publications Limited* to monitor content, links, and even reader feedback left in the comment section of each article. Failure to remove questionable (taken to the extreme, objectionable), and copyrighted content could result in the website being blacklisted. Search engines like Google might be forced to prevent further indexing of e-IR, and U.S.-based internet service providers could be required to prevent access to the site altogether.

As we know, the internet can be an incredibly valuable tool. Simply look at the role it played in the Iranian Green Movement, or the role it played in undermining Tunisia's dictator. SOPA and PIPA could hamstring movements such as these, by making it more difficult for them to utilize Twitter, Facebook, and other social media outlets.

The internet is not a physical place. It is cyberspace. Like space, Antarctica, or even the world's oceans, the internet should be treated as part of the global commons. International agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, protect the freedom of expression and the freedoms of assembly and association. As such, the U.S. Congress should not be deliberating[1] any legislation that could undermine these rights within any

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part of the global commons—the internet included.

Hopefully, Congress will come to its senses and these pieces of legislation will both be defeated. If not, President Obama should announce his intentions to veto PIPA or SOPA, and the White House should announce a real plan to tackle the very real issues of online piracy and intellectual property theft.

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[1] U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid [D-NV] has scheduled a senate vote on PIPA for Tuesday, January 24, 2012. Brendan Sasso, "Wikipedia to shut down on Wednesday to protest anti-online piracy legislation," *The Hill*, 16 January 2012; available from http://thehill.com/blogs/hillicon-valley/technology/204363-wikipedia-will-shutdown-to-protest-anti-piracy-bills (accessed 18 January 2012).

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