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STORY

Wikipedia and YouTube Battle Hollywood in SOPA Showdown

To hear some Internet companies tell it, a bill making its way through the U.S. Congress would kill the “open” nature of the web. But if you listen to Hollywood and big-brands like Nike, the same bill is necessary to protect artists and nurture American ingenuity and creativity.

Big websites such as Wikipedia, Reddit, WordPress, Mozilla and BoingBoing are shutting down their sites this week in protest of the bill, known as the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). The bill was introduced in October to aid in the fight against acts of intellectual property theft such as illegal filesharing and copying of movies and video games

The proposed law has drawn supporters from traditional media that rely on copyright to do business, from groups that represent Hollywood movies and the music recording industry to brands like L'Oreal.

Google and Facebook say that SOPA threatens the “open” spirit that has led to the innovation we value in the internet, but they do not plan to join the shutdown.

What’s a SOPA?

SOPA is currently making its way through the US House of Representatives in Congress. The bill allows the Department of Justice to take action against web sites that are “enabling or facilitating copyright infringement.”

Although the details are still being worked out, SOPA would allow the U.S. Attorney General to get a court order to shut down websites where users post illegal content and jail individuals who post copyrighted material. It would also require search engines not to allow links to guilty sites in their search results.

There is already legislation called the Digital Millenium Copyright Act (DCMA) that requires websites to take down copyrighted content “in good faith.” This is what is invoked when a YouTube video is taken down at the request of a company who has copyright over that material, like a clip from a movie or television show.

SOPA takes DCMA to new extremes and targets search engines and the ways people get to illegal sites. For example, The Pirate Bay is a popular and high-profile site that allows users to pirate movies and music. Under SOPA or PIPA, Wikipedia's article about The Pirate Bay would not be able to legally link to the site itself, and neither would this NewsHour EXTRA article.

A very similar bill, called PIPA (Protect Intellectual Property Act) is scheduled for a Senate floor vote on January 24th.

Changing the way we surf the web

Organizations such as the Motion Pictures Association of America are pushing bill, and say that it would save the jobs of thousands of Americans that lose money when people illegally download movies and video games.

Technology companies like Google and Wikipedia say that this would make it harder for people to share information online and could threaten the way the internet itself currently works. In their view, this would damage the ecology of information online.

However, supporters maintain that this protects consumers and the people who make movies, music or any other entertainment because it would be harder for people to get that content without paying for it. The MPAA says that piracy costs the US \$58 billion dollars every year, money that could be used to produce movies, television, music and video games. They also say this piracy threatens 19 million jobs in America.

What's it mean for the little guy?

At first glance, it may seem as though this legislation is a fight between two groups of very large companies like Viacom and Google.

However, Wikipedia and group of internet pioneers others argue that SOPA would affect everyone who uses the internet because it would create "an environment of tremendous fear and uncertainty for technological innovation, and seriously harm the credibility of the United States in its role as a steward of key Internet infrastructure."

Where the debate goes next- and the fate of the PIPA bill- are set to be determined on the Senate floor on January 24.

- Compiled by Ryan Brooks for NewsHour Extra