SOPA: Stop Online Piracy & Protect Intellectual Property Act

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On January 18th of this year, you probably noticed a big black square covering the Google image. You may also have tried to access Wikipedia and found that the entire website was unavailable for a day. Or you could have stopped by a handful of other websites and noticed a slew of other protests against two bills.

The thing is, SOPA and PIPA are designed to target and block foreign websites which perpetuate internet piracy. A direct quote from the legislation says, “A service provider shall take technically feasible and reasonable measures designed to prevent access by its subscribers located within the United States to the foreign infringing site (or portion thereof) that is subject to the order.”

Essentially, piracy websites would become unavailable and search engines could get in legal trouble for linking to those websites.

Right now, these bills are very strongly supported by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) and the Recording Industry Association of America – the trade organizations that lose the most money from copyright infringement. Theoretically, it’s a nice, moral idea: eliminate piracy. Everybody pays for what they get.

In practice, however, the idea is scary. Consider if an infringing photo or video clip were posted on Facebook. Facebook itself could get into serious trouble for hosting the infringement. The same would be true if a photo on Wikipedia was not properly cited or was considered infringing.

Furthermore, the bill is vaguely worded and gives the government an awful lot of power over an average American’s access to the Internet. Who decides what material is considered infringement? What are the criteria that a website must meet in order for it to be removed? By giving the government the authority to censor websites promoting piracy, we set a precedent which the government may use to prevent citizens from viewing material that trade associations and powerful corporations do not want them to see. It is a slippery slope down to the elimination of our first amendment rights and our freedom to express ourselves online.

How would it be if the next social media site – the next Youtube, for example – was blocked on the grounds that it was infringing material? Consider that in March 2011, it was estimated that 48 hours of video were uploaded to Youtube every minute that year. Think of all that information. Now imagine that it was inaccessible. Important social movements, such as It Gets Better, which provides support for depressed gay youth, use Youtube to send important messages. Access to free education like Khan Academy, which offers advanced mathematics and science lessons, could be removed from Youtube. Even Justin Bieber, whether you like him or not, began his career by being recognized on Youtube. What if that opportunity was taken away from those millions of aspiring singers?