

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

Wikipedia goes dark

Wikipedia, the sixth most visited site in the world, closed down its English-language pages in January 2012 in protest against two anti-piracy bills in the US. But should the online encyclopedia engage in activism?



“Do your homework early,” was the advice of Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales to students on Monday 16 January, ahead of the online encyclopedia’s blackout on Wednesday 18 January 2012.

That’s right. [Wikipedia](#), the sixth most visited site in the world, according to Alexa, took its English-language pages offline for 24 hours to protest two anti-piracy bills in the US: the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA).

(FSD’s Brian Pellot has written a case study on SOPA, which you can read and comment on [here](#). But [in short](#), SOPA, which is being considered by the US house of representatives, aims to crack down on online piracy, while PIPA is the parallel bill in the senate.)

Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of Wikipedia, who by the way will be speaking at our launch [event](#) on

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Thursday 19 January 2012, [told](#) the BBC: “The point is the bill is so over broad and so badly written that it's going to impact all kinds of things that, you know, don't anything to do with piracy.”

A press release from Wikipedia stated that 1,800 members of the Wikipedia community voted on whether to take action. A tiny (not to mention unelected) number of individuals when compared to the 474 million unique visitors to the site a month. Should Wikipedia have opened up the decision to its users?

Nor is this the first time Wikipedia has decided to take action. In October 2011, the Italian Wikipedian community [suspended](#) its Italian pages in opposition to the wiretapping bill proposed by the Italian parliament. Under the draft law, websites would have to amend content within 48 hours if anyone [deemed](#) it “harmful or biased”.

The organisation wrote at the time: “The bill would hinder the work of projects such as Wikipedia: open, volunteer-driven, and collaborative spaces dedicated to sharing high-quality knowledge, not to mention the ability of users of the internet to engage in democratic, free speech opportunities.”

A noble cause, and one that is certainly in the spirit of Free Speech Debate. But should Wikipedia engage in activism? Neutrality is after all one of its [five pillars](#). Wikipedia's [line](#) is that while its articles "are neutral, its existence is not".

What do you think? Watch Free Speech Debate's Oxford launch event with Jimmy Wales [here](#). (He discusses the Wikipedia blackout at 42mins and 50secs.)

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