

Soapy SOPA to relax DNS filtering

by Greg Sandoval and Declan McCullagh via Vinnie - CNET *Saturday, Jan 14 2012, 10:48am*
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In a move the technology sector will surely see as a victory, a controversial antipiracy bill being debated in Congress will no longer include a provision that would require Internet service providers to block access to overseas Web sites accused of piracy.



Rep. Chairman Lamar Smith (R-Texas), one of the biggest backers of the Stop Online Piracy Act, today said he plans to remove the Domain Name System requirements from the Stop Online Piracy Act.

"After consultation with industry groups across the country," Smith said in a statement released by his office, "I feel we should remove DNS-blocking from the Stop Online Piracy Act so that the [U.S. House Judiciary] Committee can further examine the issues surrounding this provision.

"We will continue to look for ways," Smith continued, "to ensure that foreign Web sites cannot sell and distribute illegal content to U.S. consumers."

Smith's decision comes a day after Sen. Patrick Leahy, announced he would strip SOPA's sister bill in the senate, known as the Protect IP Act, of all DNS requirements.

Both bills are heavily supported by a wide group of copyright owners, including the big record companies and Hollywood film studios. The tech sector has claimed that if the bills became law, they would rob the Web of free speech and damage the health of the Internet. Copyright owners charge that online piracy has damaged their businesses and costs workers their jobs.

Without the DNS provision, SOPA now looks a great deal more like the OPEN Act, a bill introduced by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) and Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), which was designed to be an alternative to SOPA. A watered-down SOPA means Smith improves his chances of getting the bill through Congress but at this point, nothing is assured.

Late today came word that six Republican senators have asked Majority Leader Harry Reid to postpone a vote on Pro IP, also known as PIPA. The senators wrote: "Prior to committee action, some members expressed substantive concerns about the bill, and there was a commitment to resolve them prior to floor consideration."

Leahy issued a statement which appears to be a reply to the request by those senators. He argued that the PIPA vote should go ahead as planned.

"Saying no to debating the [Pro IP Act] hurts the economy," Leahy wrote. "It says no to the American workers whose livelihoods depend on intellectual property-reliant businesses. And it says yes to the criminals hiding overseas stealing American intellectual property...all Senators should agree that this is a debate we must have...and should support cloture on the motion to proceed on January 24."

It sounds as if Leahy is trying to keep some of the bill's supporters from bolting. There's little question now that some SOPA and PIPA backers in Congress are in retreat and seeking some kind of compromise in the face of significant opposition.

Congress "is realizing that they are not going to slip these bills in the cover of night," said Corynne McSherry, the intellectual property director for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a technology advocacy group that has been among the most outspoken critics of SOPA and PIPA. "They didn't let the Internet participate in the legislative process and the Internet is speaking now."

When asked whether the removal of the DNS provision is sufficient for EFF to drop its opposition, McSherry said it's not even close. Though the DNS portions are deleted, Protect IP still targets financial transaction providers, Internet advertising services, and providers of "information location tools," or ILTs, including search engines and other Web sites.

"These bills need to be killed altogether," McSherry said. "Our view all along has been they are not fixable."

Statements like that from SOPA and PIPA opponents infuriate supporters of the bills. They have long said that doing nothing about Web piracy is not an option. The Recording Industry Association of America, the trade group for the four major record companies, issued a statement following Leahy's decision yesterday to remove DNS from PIPA.

"Instead of helping to come up with mechanisms to deny access to the U.S. market by foreign criminals," the RIAA wrote, "the opposition just keeps saying no. It is incumbent upon them to help develop language that will ensure that criminals can't access our market, while at the same time protecting our need for national cybersecurity."

In the fight over the antipiracy bills, the tech community banded together in an unprecedented show of cooperation and labored to rally opposition. Regardless of what happens with SOPA and PIPA, the tech sector has served notice that it has become a potent force in Washington.

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