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## Five-Minute Analyst

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### Wikipedia's protest

*Why would Wikipedia have a blackout but make it totally ineffective?*

*Answer: Because they're smart.*



**By Harrison Schramm**

On Jan. 18, several Web sites, most notably Wikipedia, took an active stance to protest U.S. government legislation on piracy and the internet – the “Protect IP” and “SOPA” bills. Wikipedia took the most aggressive stance by “blacking out” its Web site for 24 hours. This article not only examines the legislation itself, but also the act of protest from an analytic point of view. I have an interest in this area because it seems that our technology is evolving at a pace that far outstrips our laws and policies.

Protests are dangerous for service providers of any sort; if my favorite coffee shop is closed on Monday to protest legislation, it may raise my awareness of the law. If the coffee shop remains closed on Tuesday, it will raise my awareness that I need another coffee shop. Whatever the leaders of Wikipedia and other Web sites' policy stances, they are savvy enough to know this. Wikipedia went to great lengths in the run-up to the blackout to point out that they would only be offline for one day, and that the extremity of their act – depriving the world of Wikipedia – was matched only by the importance of the legislation. This statement has one gigantic flaw:

Wikipedia did not meaningfully deprive anyone of its services.

I use Wikipedia because I like to take “random walks” through the topic lists; my favorite starting places are 1960s rock bands. These journeys lead, well, everywhere. I do this frequently but mostly through a smartphone app; I rarely access the Web site directly. I discovered when I awoke on Jan. 18 that the wiki blackout did not stop my app and therefore had no effect on me.

I teach a distance learning course on Wednesday mornings, and I made a joke that my students would not be able to “fact check” me in real time since Wikipedia was down. Several of my students immediately responded that they had in fact already found the “secret backdoor” into the Wikipedia blackout – press the esc key as soon as your requested page appears, and you will access it like normal. This backdoor is similar to the 1970s phenomena of phreaking, where a captain crunch whistle was used to get free phone calls [1].

This leads us to the big question: Why would Wikipedia have a blackout but make it totally ineffective? Answer: Because they're smart.

Let's compare the Internet blackout in Wikipedia with the coffee shop example before. Now, I'm a regular customer at my coffee shop, and the last thing my barista wants to do is to get me started going somewhere else. More than that, the barista and I are friends; he would feel bad if he deprived me of a service on which I've come to depend. So if he were to close in protest, he might let his loyal customers know that the back door to the shop would be open with an urn of coffee sitting out and an “honor box” to deposit some coins in for the cup I took. This is because the shop owner wants to make a point without alienating his customers. And I think this is, ultimately, what Wikipedia did on Jan. 18.

Finally, there may be a secret message in Wikipedia's actions – one of the arguments against SOPA is that the law would discourage casual users but not meaningfully deter those who use piracy on the Internet for a living. Similarly, the banner that Wikipedia put up discouraged casual users, but people who use it for a living almost certainly figured out the backdoor within minutes. I did.

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## REFERENCES

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phreaking> . Ironically, I used the “esc” key Wikipedia hack to access the article on phone hacking.

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