

US Senate committee approves online piracy bill

November 18 2010, by Chris Lefkow



Head of the Senate Judiciary Committee, US Sen. Patrick Leahy speaks in Washington, DC in May 2010. The committee passed legislation on Thursday that would give US law enforcement more tools to crack down on websites engaged in piracy of movies, television shows and music.

The US Senate Judiciary Committee approved a bill on Thursday that would give US law enforcement more tools to crack down on websites abroad engaged in piracy of movies, television shows and music.

The Combating Online Infringement and Counterfeits Act, which has the support of the entertainment industry but has been strongly criticized by digital rights and other groups, was approved by a vote of 19-0.

"Few things are more important to the future of the American economy and job creation than protecting our intellectual property," said Senator Patrick Leahy, a Democrat from Vermont who co-sponsored the bill.

"That is why the legislation is supported by both labor and industry, and Democrats and Republicans are standing together," Leahy said.

The bill gives the Justice Department an expedited process for cracking down on websites engaged in piracy or the sale of counterfeit goods including having courts issue shutdown orders against domains based outside the United States.

"Rogue websites are essentially digital stores selling illegal and sometimes dangerous products," Leahy said. "If they existed in the physical world, the store would be shuttered immediately and the proprietors would be arrested."

"We cannot excuse the behavior because it happens online and the owners operate overseas," he said. "The Internet needs to be free -- not lawless."

Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah and the co-sponsor of the bill, described the Internet "as the glue of international commerce in today's global economy.

"But it's also been turned into a tool for online thieves to sell counterfeit and pirated goods, making hundreds of millions of dollars off of stolen American intellectual property," Hatch said.

In May, a congressional anti-piracy caucus condemned Canada, China, Mexico, Russia and Spain for failing to crack down on Internet piracy and said theft of intellectual property in those countries was at "alarming levels."

In addition to the music, movie and TV industries, the bill has received the backing of newspapers, authors and publishers but it has been condemned by the the Electronic Freedom Foundation (EFF) as an

"Internet censorship" bill.

"Blacklisting entire sites out of the domain name system," the group said, is a "reckless scheme that will undermine global Internet infrastructure and censor legitimate online speech."

While it received unanimous support in committee, the bill is likely to run into some opposition when it reaches the floor of the Senate or the House of Representatives, either during the current session or in January, when the new Congress convenes.

Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon, said Thursday that while online copyright infringement is a legitimate concern the bill "as it's written today is the wrong medicine."

"It seems almost like using a bunker-busting cluster bomb when what you really need is a precision-guided missile," he said, adding that unless the legislation is modified he will seek to prevent its passage.

Ed Black, president and chief executive of the Computer and Communications Industry Association, noted concerns that the bill "threatens Internet openness and freedom."

"Even when done with good intentions, when we create blacklists and take down domains, other governments will no doubt replicate these practices -- only for more far reaching, less noble purposes," Black said.

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