

Brussels gripped by lobbying war over copyright law

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Music legend Paul McCartney (R with Dave Grohl) as well as major music labels and film studios have lobbied politicians urging them to back the changes

It has been dubbed one of the most brutal lobbying wars in Brussels history, pitting media firms and Paul McCartney on one side against Big Tech and internet freedom denizens on the other.

The fight is over controversial copyright laws that the European Union says will drag the bloc into the 21st century and ensure creators of music, movies and news are paid fairly.

"It was a very intensive and aggressive lobbying battle... definitely one of the most intense," Olivier Hoedeman, of the campaign group Corporate Europe Observatory, which studies the influence of lobbying groups on EU law, told AFP

"There is a huge amount of money at stake."

Brussels is one of the top lobbying centres on the planet after Washington, where everyone from corporations to unions and special interest groups try to influence EU policy.

But the battle over the European Commission's proposed Copyright Directive has been particularly intense, reaching fever pitch as the European Parliament prepares to have a second vote on the issue on September 12.

The fight is over two parts of the planned law.

The first is Article 13—it would make platforms like Google-owned YouTube legally liable for copyrighted material to prevent content producers being ripped off.

The second is Article 11—it would create a so-called "neighbouring right" meaning that newspapers, magazines and news agencies including AFP would have to be paid when Google or other websites link to their stories.

'Unprecedented violence'

The battle lines have now been drawn up.

On one side are artists and the traditional media, the content providers in desperate search of revenue at a time when pretty much everything can be seen online for free.

Critics including Silicon Valley say the change will lead in effect to blanket censorship by platforms that have become an online hub for creativity, especially YouTube—and also possibly result in the end of memes, the online jokes that often rely on a short clip or picture.

The proposal for neighbouring rights has meanwhile been criticised as a "link tax" that will stifle discourse on the internet.

Wikipedia chief Jimmy Wales weighed in on their side and the online encyclopaedia went down in several European countries in protest.

The [tech industry](#) won round one of the fight in July when the 750 members of the European Parliament rejected the text in an initial vote.

Some MEPs hit out at what French centre-right lawmaker Marc Joulaud called a "lobbying campaign of unprecedented violence orchestrated by GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon)".

"The only thing I can compare it to is the arms industry," socialist MEP Virginie Roziere told AFP, saying that the digital companies had used "huge resources" to create "pseudo citizens campaigns."

Roziere said she received more than 40,000 emails against the law in the three weeks before the July vote.

But campaigners against the law played down the criticisms.

"To be honest it's the only way to get hold of MEPs. What are you supposed to do, send them a post-it note?" said Caroline de Cock, coordinator of Copyright for Creativity (C4C).

She said that C4C represented consumer groups, museums and libraries but conceded that it was "partly" financed by another key party: the CCIA, or Computer and Communications Industry Association, which lobbies for the digital industry.

De Cock said Google was also a client of a PR agency that she runs but hit back: "People attack the messenger when they don't like the message."

'Low blows'

It is hard to put a figure on the sums spent by the tech industry, although the estimate by the British industry body UK Music that Google spent 31 million euros (\$36 million) is "very unlikely", said Hoedeman.

Siada El Ramly, the director of EDiMA, a lobby group for the tech sector, said they had spent "much less than one million euros" on the "priority" dossier.

She also criticised the lobbying methods used by the music industry, including using legendary electronic music artist Jean-Michel Jarre, president of the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers, to defend the law in front of MEPs.

McCartney meanwhile wrote to MEPs accusing some internet platforms of refusing to compensate artists for their work "while they exploit it for their own profit".

However German Green MEP Julia Reda, who has led efforts to sink the

bill, has repeatedly railed against "low blows" by media companies and artists.

Ahead of September's vote the lobbying campaign has stepped up again.

C4C began emailing MEPs again on Monday while European newspapers are set to publish a letter by senior AFP reporter Sammy Ketz signed by dozens of European journalists.

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