

Why Was PTO Filtering Its WiFi - and Blocking cdt.org?

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Why on earth would a government agency blacklist the websites of advocacy groups like CDT, ACLU, EFF, and PK from the WiFi network it offers to visitors? Yesterday, Jamie Love [caught](#) [2] the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office blocking access to the website of his organization (KEI) and a variety of others. The agency quickly ceased blocking the sites when Love's discovery became public, but the episode raises a number of troubling questions.

What's the rationale for trying to block "political/activist groups" sites from this network in the first place? The network in question is a WiFi system made available to attendees of PTO's Global Intellectual Property Academy (GIPA) and other visitors to the PTO's building (not PTO employees, apparently). GIPA provides training programs to foreign government officials on intellectual property issues. So, the United States - the world's leading proponent of global Internet freedom, having made this a core element of its foreign policy - invites foreign officials from around the globe to come for an educational program . . . and then actively censors the Internet access it offers them, screening out pesky groups who insist on speaking out about political issues? Seriously? What kind of message does that send to our foreign visitors - that the U.S. Government, for all its lip service about the virtues of unfettered and uncensored Internet access, recognizes the need for censorship when it comes to the systems it runs itself?

PTO now points the finger at a contractor. But surely the contractor didn't spontaneously decide to filter web access for PTO's guests. The question is, what kind of instructions did PTO give to its contractor regarding filtering? What kind of supervision did it provide? And how long has this blocking been going on?

The other interesting question is, who was tasked with deciding what websites to block, and what criteria did they use? Is it just coincidence that many of the advocacy groups blocked by the filter have been critics of some aspects of current intellectual property policy, and often take positions that are at odds with some of the large intellectual property trade associations and companies? As CDT recently [explained](#) [3] in comments to the U.S. Intellectual Property Enforcement Coordinator, copyright policymakers need to start showing that they understand and are sensitive to the broad range of interests involved in copyright policy. If policymakers are perceived as catering only to a narrow set of corporate interests, it will further erode respect for copyright in general. Blocking websites of dissenting voices is not a good way to start.

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