

Bill threatens UK's reputation

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From Mr Tom Alexander and others.

Sir, We regret that the House of Lords adopted amendment 120A to the digital economy bill ("[Bill will censor internet, providers claim](#)", March 6). This amendment not only significantly changes the injunctions procedure in the UK but will lead to an increase in internet service providers blocking websites accused of illegally hosting copyrighted material without cases even reaching a judge. The amendment seeks to address the legitimate concerns of rights-holders but would have unintended consequences that far outweigh any benefits it could bring.

Endorsing a policy that would encourage the blocking of websites by UK broadband providers or other internet companies is a very serious step for the UK to take. There are myriad legal, technical and practical issues to reconcile before this can be considered a proportionate and necessary public policy option. In some cases, these may never be reconciled. These issues have not even been considered in this case.

The Lords have been thoughtful in their consideration of the bill to date. It is therefore bitterly disappointing that the House has allowed an amendment with obvious shortcomings to proceed without challenging its proponents to consider and address the full consequences. Put simply, blocking access as envisaged by this clause would both widely disrupt the internet in the UK and elsewhere and threaten freedom of speech and the open internet, without reducing copyright infringement as intended. To rush through such a controversial proposal at the tail end of a parliament, without any kind of consultation with consumers or industry, is very poor lawmaking.

We are particularly concerned that a measure of this kind as a general purpose policy could have an adverse impact on the reputation of the UK as a place to do online business and conflict with the broader objectives of Digital Britain. This debate has created tension between specific interest groups and the bigger prize of promoting a policy framework that supports our digital economy and appropriately balances rights and responsibilities. All parties should take steps to safeguard this prize and place it at the heart of public policy in this area.

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