



Wikipedia tries to mend fences with Congress

By Julian Hattem
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Wikipedia is inviting more participation from Congress despite a string of pranks and controversial edits to the online encyclopedia by Capitol Hill staffers.

The leaders of Wikimedia D.C. — the capital’s volunteer arm of the nonprofit groups that run Wikipedia — tried to build a bridge to Congress in a blog post published on Monday, saying that knowledgeable congressional staffers could be a valuable resource for the site.

“Government staff are experts in areas of public interest, including very new hot topics,” group President James Hare and Treasurer Peter Meyer wrote. “They play a promising role in our mission to make a better online reference work, with notable, neutrally phrased, verifiable content.

“We can overlook minor discretions and work with Capitol Hill and all federal employees to forge a path forward,” they added.

The note comes after weeks of abuse of the user-generated Web resource, which is the globe's sixth most popular website.

Since the July launch of a Twitter bot that automatically updates whenever someone from a Capitol Internet protocol (IP) address updates Wikipedia, the site has experienced a slew of edits that seem to have been made purely as pranks, such as changes to the pages for ice cream treat Chaco Taco or the "reptilian" race of aliens.

One congressional IP address was blocked from the site for 10 days.

About a month later, the same IP address was banned for a month, after editing the description of an actor on the hit show “Orange Is the New Black” from “a real transgender woman” to “a real man pretending to be a woman.”

Hare and Meyer said that it doesn’t have to be that way.

The organization worked with the Cato Institute to help familiarize congressional staffers with Wikipedia in August.

In their new blog post, they said lawmakers' offices should develop a code of conduct for using the site. That means registering individual accounts instead of editing anonymously and acknowledging potential conflicts of interest.

“There is a great potential for Wikipedia as a platform to increase awareness of Congress' activities, a potential we should not overlook,” they wrote.