



US Congressional Staffs Urged to Update Wikipedia Pages

By Kells Hetherington
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A libertarian public policy organization based in Washington was on Capitol Hill Monday, urging U.S. House and Senate staff members to more effectively utilize the popular Internet site Wikipedia to inform the public about key legislation in Congress.

The CATO Institute said that during a recent 90-day period, almost 400,000 people clicked on Wikipedia to find out about "important" legislation.

Wikipedia is a free Internet encyclopedia to which nearly anyone can gain access and edit information. The non-profit group that runs Wikipedia says it is the sixth most popular website in the world, with nearly 500 million unique visitors each month.

The CATO Institute told lawmakers Monday that the site should be a tool utilized by members of Congress and their staffs.

Some congressional staffers said their bosses are hesitant to allow them to post relevant information on Wikipedia. Many lawmakers prefer other sites like Facebook or Twitter to communicate with the public.

The CATO Institute advocates less government and increased transparency. It asserts that Wikipedia entries offer a far more effective way of communicating with the average constituent than either the traditional media or press releases published on a member of Congress' own web page.

According to a CATO senior fellow, Jim Harper, "Americans in huge numbers are looking for information about what Congress is doing. And the best source of information about what is happening in Congress is the staffers who are writing the bills. We think getting those staffers to participate in Wikipedia will vastly increase the information that is available to the public."

In the early days of Wikipedia, there was controversy about members of Congress or their staffs editing the personal pages that describe politicians and their histories to

make them look better. CATO said such criticism could be muted if staff members would think in terms of writing a news report and linking to their sources.

"So a custom grew up that there should not be Wikipedia editing by congressional staff. That unfortunately has prevented good information from getting on Wikipedia and getting out to the public, Harper said. "So we are working to try and change the old consensus that congressional staff should not edit Wikipedia."

The Institute says it is updating and creating pages about legislation that goes to the floor for a vote, and that it has its own staff working on Wikipedia entries.