Advocates to Congress: Go ahead, edit Wikipedia

By Julian Hattem
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Transparency advocates are pushing Congress to get more active on Wikipedia, saying it's time for staffers to embrace the sixth most-popular website in the world.

"There's an aversion on Capitol Hill to editing Wikipedia, and I think there's some distrust among the Wikipedia community for edits coming from Congress," Jim Harper, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said at a Capitol Hill event on Monday.

"But with work and with care, I think we can improve that situation markedly and bring information to the American people about what happens here."

Harper joined colleagues from Cato and a public policy advisory board for the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that oversees Wikipedia, for a luncheon discussion urging congressional staffers to edit more pages on the site.

Wikipedia can be a valuable resource for spreading information about what Congress is doing, Harper said, but many staffers are skittish about the site.

Anxiety on Capitol Hill about using Wikipedia was heightened earlier this year when a Twitter account, @congressedits, started automatically tweeting whenever Wikipedia pages were anonymously edited from a congressional Internet Protocol (IP) address.

Web developer Ed Summers, who created the Twitter bot, has said he only meant to better make information accessible to more people, and never set out to shame congressional offices for editing entries.

"I created @congressedits because I hoped it could engender more, better ideas and tools like it. More thought experiments," he wrote in a blog post as the account gained popularity.

"We need transparency in our government more than ever, so we can have healthy debates about the issues that matter."

In July, staffers in the House were blocked from editing Wikipedia for 10 days, after they made a number of "disruptive" edits that seemed to be at least partly made as a prank to trigger the Twitter account.

People operating from a House IP address edited pages for "Moon landing conspiracy theories," the frozen treat Choco Taco and the fabled reptilian race of aliens, among many others. Many of the edits were minor grammatical changes, stoking suspicion that they were made merely to show up in the stream of the Twitter account.

The Twitter bot only logs anonymous edits, which are "immediately cast with the likelihood that they're low-quality edits, that they're inappropriate edits, they have to be reversed," said Harper, who recently helped make a similar Twitter account that gives updates whenever anyone edits pages for legislation on Wikipedia.

The nature of @congressedits could inspire more staffers to sign up with their own accounts on the site so they are judged on the merits of their own work.

"Your first step, if you're going to edit a piece of legislation or really any article [on Wikipedia], is you should join and become a user," said Cato legislative researcher Michelle Newby.

"This is good because it gives you accountability," she added. "You can go on editing from the same building as this jerk over here; his edits and my edits are different."