

Wikipedia wants Congressional staffers to contribute, but bias is a big concern

By Lindsey Holden
August 27, 2014

WASHINGTON—Congress may soon be coming to a Wikipedia page near you.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, has suggested congressional staffers should use their political expertise to edit Wikipedia pages related to bills and legislation.

“We’re trying to make government more legible, we’re trying to make it more available, and I think editing Wikipedia is a way of doing that,” said Cato senior fellow Jim Harper. “Getting the notable bills up there, getting them written about, so people...doing that search to find out what’s going on in Congress can go to that resource.”

Supporters say Capitol Hill expertise will help provide better information on legislation, while others fear turning the pages into partisan political fodder.

Anyone can edit Wikipedia’s pages—a named account isn’t required to contribute, although the Internet encyclopedia displays unnamed editors’ IP addresses. This mode of tracking contributors allowed developer Ed Summers to create in July a Twitter bot known as @congressedits, which tweets edits by unnamed contributors using Capitol Hill IP addresses.

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In a July 10 post on his website, Summers, like Harper, said he sees a Wikipedia-Congress partnership as “a potentially useful transparency tool.”

@congressedits has tweeted more than 240 times since July 8, so it’s clear congressional sources are already editing Wikipedia. So what’s stopping an official Congressional Wikipedia editing effort?

Scandals involving improper Congressional Wikipedia edits have created what Harper called “reticence on the Congressional side to edit Wikipedia.” In mid- and late July,

soon after Summers created @congressedits, a Wikipedia administrator twice blocked anonymous edits from a House of Representatives IP address, first for 24 hours and then for 10 days, for making “disruptive edits.” Administrators recently blocked the same address for a month on August 20, after an anonymous user made transphobic edits to the “Orange is the New Black” Wikipedia page.

Despite these scandals, some Wikipedia editors still think congressional staffers, who have specialized knowledge about complicated bills and legislation, would make good contributors—provided they edit using accounts and abide by the site’s conflict of interest rules.

“What we’re trying to do is encourage new editors,” said Gerald Shields, promotion coordinator for Wikimedia DC, an independent sub-group of the Wikimedia Foundation that runs Wikipedia.

How Wikipedia prevents bias

“We just have to have experts. And where are those experts? If the experts reside as staff members on the Hill, we recruit them, we educate them about conflict of interest, and we add to the sum repository of human knowledge that is Wikipedia.”

Wikipedia’s conflict of interest rules don’t completely bar users, like congressional staffers, who might have potential conflicts, from editing. The rules state that users must remain neutral and put the interests of Wikipedia before their own whenever editing a page. They also suggest that users with potential conflicts use one of three strategies: recuse themselves from editing; disclose their conflict regarding a particular page; or manage the conflict by asking other editors to monitor their actions and the neutrality of their edits.

Dominic McDevitt-Parks, who is Wikipedian-in-residence at the National Archives, isn’t sure if having congressional staffers edit Wikipedia is the best way for Capitol Hill to improve its public outreach efforts. He thinks if agencies were more open with data, sites like Wikipedia could naturally become better sources of information.

“We need to work better at making data more open and more easily accessible and have it be structured data...that allow Wikipedia to crowd-source its information,” McDevitt-Parks said. “So there are ways to improve Wikipedia as a by-product, just by making data more open.”

John Wonderlich, the policy director of the government watchdog Sunlight Foundation, agrees with McDevitt. Wonderlich thinks Congress should work harder to make information public.

“Right now, lots and lots of websites and public systems rely on scrapers to make copies of legislative data as it’s published online,” Wonderlich said. “We’ve been calling on

Congress to make that scraping unnecessary and make it easier to have direct access to the data of bills and amendments and votes and the official work of Congress.”

Wonderlich has concerns that congressional staffers are more public relations coordinators than policy specialists, a bias which, he worries, might rub seep into Wikipedia. But he supports congressional involvement in the site.

“I want to see congressional staffs more involved in public dialogue,” Wonderlich said. “Increasingly that kind of dialogue happens online.”

Do you trust Congressional staffers to educate rather than promote? Let us know in the comments.