



Cato Institute encourages Congress to use Wikipedia to spread information about pending legislation

By Morgan Chalfant
August 18, 2014

Wikipedia might just be the key to bridging the gap between the American public and their representatives in Congress.

A recent panel brought together by The Cato Institute discussed the potential for Congressional staffers to edit Wikipedia entries about pending bills in order to raise awareness about legislation brought forth and discussed by members of Congress.

The first to speak on the panel, senior fellow at the Cato Institute Jim Harper explained that Congress can use Wikipedia to “advance the ball on transparency” by leveraging the site as a tool to communicate information about pending bills.

Harper labeled the difficulty of Congress in delivering transparency the “basic problem” with our government. He also emphasized the fact that the Obama administration has prompted a “slowdown in the transparency effort” that needs to be reversed.

The Cato senior fellow challenged Congress to “flip from aversion to embrace of Wikipedia” in order to directly engage with the communities congressmen represent on Capitol Hill.

Legislative researcher and writer for Cato Institute Michelle Newby went into detail about the way in which individuals on Capitol Hill can contribute to content on Wikipedia that deals directly with Congressional legislation.

She encouraged Congressional staffers to become members of the Wikipedia community and add information to pages created for specific legislation in order to keep regular Americans informed about bills pending in Congress.

Newby insisted that we need “experts in policy” to join the Wikipedia community and enhance the information made available via the site about our government.

When asked by moderator John Maniscalco about the “stigma” that Wikipedia has — especially within the academic community — because people are skeptical of its accuracy, Newby assured that Wikipedia is consumed by “ordinary people” and that the site thus is a perfect medium through which Congress can reach average Americans.

“Your college professor isn’t really your audience,” she explained.

Wikimedia DC Public Policy Committee member Jim Hayes also joined Harper and Newby on the panel to give the audience more insight into the workings of the Wikipedia community.

The Cato Institute event came in the wake of a 90-day period during which there were nearly 900,000 hits on Wikipedia articles concerning pending legislation in Congress.