



Let's Please Not Encourage Congress to Actively Edit Wikipedia

Written by Jason Koebler
August 18, 2014

Congressional debates play out in the media, on Twitter, in office buildings on Capitol Hill, in back rooms all over DC, and on the legislature floor. Do they really have to play out on Wikipedia, too?

The Cato Institute, an influential libertarian think tank in Washington, suggested today that more Congressional staffers should be editing Wikipedia articles about proposed legislation as a means of "transparency" and as a way of speaking directly to constituents.

Many Wiki pages about proposed bills are out of date, nonexistent, one-sided, or simply lacking good data. The thinking goes that members of Congress and their staffs know more about the bills than anyone else, so they should probably become active Wikipedia members and start editing and writing the articles themselves.

It's not hard to see why this is perhaps an ill-advised idea. There have already been numerous scandals in which Congressional staffers were caught editing politically controversial Wikipedia pages to scrub scandalous information about a member, insert attacks on another member, or otherwise futz with the site to make someone look bad (or, as it may happen, good).

That's one of the reason for the existence of Congress-Edits, a Twitter bot that automatically posts whenever someone makes an anonymous Wiki edit using a computer with a Congressionally-connected IP address.

"In the past, there were scandals where people from the Hill, in Congressional offices were editing the pages of members of congress they work for. Generally, since then, there's aversion, there's suspicion [to do that]," Jim Harper, a senior fellow (and Wikipedia editor) with the Cato Institute said today. "We'd like to see them flip from that aversion to embrace Wikipedia. I think things will change. It's just a matter of which Congressional office will step up and start editing Wikipedia first?"

Obviously, as Congress-Edits shows, Hill staffers are already editing Wikipedia. But this idea that bypassing the press (which Harper brought up numerous times) to tell constituents *the real deal* directly on Wikipedia is tricky at best, and outright corrupt and manipulative at worst.

The temptation to do it is obvious: Lots of people use Wikipedia as their main source of information about legislative matters, and if you write it yourself, you can talk directly to constituents on a site they actually read, without running it through the filter of a journalist. Over a recent 90 day period, Wiki pages relating to pending legislation garnered more than 400,000 visitors.

"People read [Wikipedia], especially for major bills. If you write an article [about a bill], it shows up on the first page of Google hits. People are going to go there and read the article," said Michelle Newby, a legislative researcher at Cato.

So, obviously, there's going to be incentive for a staffer to write about why "a bill is good or bad or terrible or ways it can be improved," and with it, an incentive to spin it the way you want it to be read.

Newby suggested that the "mindset" of a Wikipedia editor matters just as much as the actual content itself. If a staffer edits without actively trying to push his or her member's viewpoint, that should be perfectly fine and will lead to more informative Wikipedia articles about legislation, she argued.

It's a nice thought, but that's hogwash, and it's not how Washington works. Staffers and legislators are inherently not objective. They literally have to vote on these bills, which should shatter any illusions of impartiality they manage to create.

As John Maniscalco, director of Congressional Affairs at Cato, brought up, staffers are paid to make their bosses look good, not provide unfiltered information to the public.

"I think what might be on most congressional staffers' minds right now is 'I'm not paid to engage in public debate, I'm paid to promote by boss' work,'" he said.

That's spot on. There may be a dearth of good Wikipedia editors out there (it's a thankless job, that's for sure), and, yes, Congressional staffers are experts in legislative affairs. But they're also experts in spin, and they also work for elected officials who have a lot to gain or lose from public perception.

That's not to say that Wikipedia articles about legislation are always fairly balanced as they stand now. They're written by lobbyists, by PR firms, by nonprofits who have a stake in the issue. That, unfortunately, is a necessary evil for now. But let's not invite the people who stand to have the most to gain or lose from an article's spin to further muddle the situation.