Wikipedia

In September 2019, the Legislative Information and Communication Staff (LINCS) association received a request for information about updating/editing legislators' Wikipedia pages. The specific question was:

- Is this something legislative communicators **should** do?

- If so, **how** should they approach the project?

Shown below is a summary of the responses.

Delaware – *Senate*
I only have a little experience updating Wikipedia pages and haven't updated any of ours, but here is some important reading from their site regarding how they define conflict of interest, how to approach editing if you do go ahead with it, and some relevant posts from the COI discussion board. **In general, unless there is nobody else out there to make basic and important updates, I'd avoid it.**

- Basic primer for contributing to Wikipedia:
  https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Contributing_to_Wikipedia
- Wikipedia editing and Conflict of Interest:
  https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest
  - *"Determining that someone has a COI is a **description of a situation**. It is not a judgment about that person's state of mind or integrity. A COI can exist in the absence of bias, and bias regularly exists in the absence of a COI. Beliefs and desires may lead to biased editing, but they do not constitute a COI. **COI emerges from an editor's roles and relationships, and the tendency to bias that we assume exists when those roles and relationships conflict."***
  - Important/relevant, esp. for partisan/caucus staff: "*Activities regarded by insiders as simply "getting the word out" may appear promotional or propagandistic to the outside world. If you edit articles while involved with campaigns in the same area, you may have a conflict of interest. Political candidates and their staff should not edit articles about themselves, their supporters, or their opponents. **Government employees should not edit articles about their agencies, government, political party, political opponents, or controversial political topics."***
    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest#Campaigning,_political

- "Plain and Simple Conflict of Interest Guide: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Plain_and_simple_conflict_of_interest_guide
  - Be **transparent** about your conflict of interest.
  - Do not edit articles about **yourself**, **your family or friends**, **your organization**, **your clients**, or **your competitors**.
  - Post **suggestions** and **sources** on the article's talk page, or in your user space.
  - The role of editors is to **summarize**, **inform**, and **reference**, not promote, whitewash, or sell.
  - Subjects require significant coverage in **independent reliable sources**.
  - State **facts** and statistics; don't be vague or general.
  - Take time to get sources and policy **right**.
  - Get neutral, uninvolved, disinterested editors to **review** your suggestions.
  - **Respect** the volunteer community's time and avoid making protracted or repeated requests.
- Relevant Discussion: J.D. Rosetti, Washington State legislator who edited his page after leaving office. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest/Noticeboard/Archive_108#JD_Rossetti
- Relevant discussion around former PA State legislator Mark B. Cohen: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest/Noticeboard/Archive_70#Mark_B._Cohen

Delaware – *House*
We had a discussion about this a while back internally, when one of our Reps had a Wiki page created for him with inaccurate info. I became an editor and went in and changed the language. But we haven't been actively seeking our Reps' Wiki pages and editing them. That would get insanely tedious.

I don't think it's something we *should* do, but it's something comms staff should be versed in doing in case the need arises. You don't want someone spouting completely untrue information on Wikipedia and no one knows how to correct the record.

Georgia – *Senate*
The Georgia Senate Press Office does not edit and update legislator's Wikipedia pages. We have found that most of those accounts contain campaign information and we do not handle any projects with relation to campaigns.

Hawaii – *Senate*
I feel that is a great idea! I came across a Wikipedia page in which a senator's number was incorrect and he was listed as a representative. I submitted the changes to Wikipedia and I thought this may be a good way to get additional documentation recorded online with our legislators. I feel some of our senators won't be "in" to it but it's worth putting the word out whether their office wants to control their pages or have Communications do so.

Illinois – *Senate*

I wouldn't recommend having staff edit their member Wikipedia pages. Wikipedia has very clear policies about neutral point of view, conflict of interest, and paid editing. It's more in line with accepted practice to have staff not only declare their paid editing, but to also have edits made to member pages by using the "requested edit" feature on article talk pages.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Conflict_of_interest#Paid_editing

Minnesota – *House*
I'm not sure if any situations like this have faced state legislators, but it has been problematic for members of Congress. Below is a story about a former Minnesota congressman whose staff were caught editing his page to be more favorable. Getting busted editing something that's supposed to be unbiased and impartial would likely lead to embarrassment, if not a full-scale scandal, so I'd recommend legislators and staff refrain from doing this.

Gutknecht joins Wikipedia tweakers - He's the latest politician to try to edit his online biography, and he, too, was detected by a volunteer editor.
Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities (MN) (Published as Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis, MN)) - August 17, 2006
- **Author/Byline:** *Kevin Diaz; Staff Writer*
- **Edition:** *METRO*
- **Section:** *NEWS*
- **Page:** *3A*

Rep. Gil Gutknecht, R-Minn., is the latest politician to be found editing his Wikipedia entry, extending a year-long trend that has snagged the likes of Republican Sen. Norm Coleman of Minnesota and Democratic Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware.

Last January, Coleman sought to soften his political past from "liberal" to "activist" in the entry for him in the online encyclopedia. Biden tried to tone down references to a past accusation of plagiarism.

Now Gutknecht, in effect, tried to expunge a reminder of a 12-year term-limit he imposed on himself in 1995.

Page histories available on Wikipedia show that Gutknecht's office tried twice - July 24 and Aug. 14 - to remove a 128-word entry on him and replace it with a more flattering 315-word entry taken from his official congressional biography.

In both cases, the original entry - including his term-limit promise - was restored within hours.

The incident echoed a similar effort earlier this year by Rep. Marty Meehan, D-Mass., to remove a passage about a broken term-limit pledge. Others who tweaked information in their Wikipedia entries include Sens. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., and Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

Wikipedia, weary of frequent political transgressors, initially decreed a two-week block on the computer that serves the entire Congress, starting last Monday.

The block was lifted Wednesday, however, after Wikipedia administrators decided it was an "excessive block for an [Internet Protocol] shared by hundreds of people."

One of the sleuths in the Gutknecht incident is a 15-year-old Wikipedia "editor" from Nashville who says he acted out of no malice for Gutknecht, but rather to protect the integrity of the online encyclopedia, which invites the public to volunteer information for its entries.

"There's a policy against autobiographical edits," said the volunteer editor, Daniel Bush, who says he is home-schooled by his parents. "At Wikipedia, we call these 'edit wars.'-"

A spokesman for Gutknecht did not dispute that his office tried to change his Wikipedia entry. But he called into question the reliability of the service, which was created in 2001 and claims to be the largest reference website on the Internet.

"We're concerned when anyone looks to Wikipedia for factual information," said Gutknecht spokesman Jon Yarian. "This is the same source that called former Assistant Attorney General John Seigenthaler a murderer in his official Wikipedia entry ... I would encourage people to find a more trustworthy place to do their research."

Kevin Diaz is a correspondent in the Star Tribune Washington Bureau.

A JURY OF WIKI PEERS

Wikipedia's peer review comes from a coterie of interested parties - citizen editors - on particular topics, and each person can have conflicting interpretations of fact. Such problems have led Wikipedia to recently bar new or anonymous users from editing the entry on Israel, for instance.

President Bush's Wikipedia listing is the most rewritten and frequently vandalized of all the millions of articles posted on the site, Wikipedia's Wayne Saewyc said.

The practice of rewriting politicians' biographies to burnish a boss' credentials or tarnish his or her opponent's has become so problematic over the past year that the people who oversee Wikipedia have set up warnings that set off alerts whenever a Capitol Hill staffer is rewriting a lawmaker's profile. Experts check the entry for chicanery, Saewyc said.

One of the most serious wiki attacks involved the entry for John Seigenthaler, former journalist and Justice Department official in the 1960s. Seigenthaler's profile was rewritten to suggest he was involved in the assassinations of John F. and Robert Kennedy, and the change remained undetected for months.

Wikipedia has about 1,000 volunteer monitors checking the accuracy of additions. "It works for the vast majority of articles," Saewyc said.

WASHINGTON POST AND COX NEWS SERVICE

Washington – *House Republican Caucus*
We've received requests for both creating and update Wikipedia pages for members. Our counsel has advised us not to do this. Since Wikipedia is open source, we could run into issues with campaign content. What are the expectations of a legislative staffer if a member's Wikipedia page is updated with unflattering information related to campaigns/elections? Aside from counsel's advice, I personally think Wikipedia page content is better handled by external/campaign staff. There aren't as many sideboards on them, so they would have a greater capacity to monitor the page and make updates.

Washington – *House Democratic Caucus*
Don't believe we've ever done this, and I know the press checks to see who edits a page. Staff in Congress keeps getting caught doing this for good and ill. I wouldn't touch a lawmaker Wikipedia page with a ginormous pole.

Wyoming – *Legislative Service Office*
We do not update legislators' Wikipedia pages and we certainly don't want to get into the business of doing that. As non-partisan staff we only take responsibility for information on the Legislature's website.