These 'wikipedians' fix climate information online

Avery Ellfeldt, E&E News reporter • Published: Monday, February 24, 2020

"Sustainable energy."

"Greta Thunberg."

"Global warming."

Those are three of the most popular climate-related articles on Wikipedia and just a handful of the roughly 1,600 that cover issues including "effects of global warming" and "global catastrophic risk."

But despite hundreds of articles, there are fewer than 50 volunteers who actively update them — most of whom aren't experts on climate issues. That's according to Su-Laine Yeo Brodsky, who has volunteered as a Wikipedia editor since 2006.

What's more, Brodsky added, is that much of the information hasn't been updated in years, rendering many climate-related articles inaccurate, misleading or sorely out of date.

"We know that some of our articles on climate change are getting hundreds of page views a day. Many are getting thousands of page views a day," Brodsky said, noting that those numbers have increased significantly in recent years.

As it stands, Wikipedia users are visiting the site's "global warming" article more than 14,000 times a day. Meanwhile, roughly 16,000 read up on "Greta Thunberg," while 24,000 do some digging on "sustainable energy," according to Wikipedia data.

"We're really considering the amount of impact that Wikipedia has — it's just a really powerful tool for educating the public, educating policymakers," Brodsky added.

That's why the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine partnered last week with Wikimedia DC, an organization that promotes Wikipedia engagement, to host a two-day "edit-a-thon" — all focused on climate change.

The aim was to facilitate collaboration between scientists, researchers and volunteer site editors to bolster climate information as the public becomes more curious about the implications of rising global temperatures.

Brodsky was one of the many climate-concerned Wikipedia editors, scientists and librarians who gathered Friday in Washington with a shared goal: to transform Wikipedia into a trove of widely accessible, evidence-based information on climate change.

Kicking off the event, attendees received training on the logistics and rules of Wikipedia editing. Later, they heard from researchers who specialize in negative emissions technologies and the role of climate change in extreme weather events. That was all before they broke into groups to begin reviewing and improving the content.

Climate scientist Astrid Caldas, with the Union of Concerned Scientists, attended the edit-a-thon out of curiosity — and concern.

"I never knew how Wikipedia worked from the other side, I never edited anything," Caldas said. But she also noted that when she's read Wikipedia articles related...
to her expertise, they've often lacked important context or didn't provide a comprehensive review of the latest science.

"I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to see how the wheels turn and maybe get involved," Caldas added. During the event, she sat down with several Wikipedia editors to discuss how articles could be improved by adding recent sources and clarifying the language.

This type of collaboration was exactly why staff at the National Academies thought a climate-focused edit-a-thon was a good idea, said Amanda Purcell, a program officer with the organization.

Seven different program divisions within the National Academies produce reports that touch on climate change. But Purcell added that one of the organization's "long-recognized challenges" is that its extensive, demanding and top-tier climate reports often stall after they're published, failing to reach the general public or organizations that could benefit from the work.

"Obviously, Wikipedia is a place where a whole bunch of people get information — they're not coming to the National Academies' website and typing in any kind of question. For us, it was sort of an obvious opportunity," Purcell added. "It was sort of a win-win-win, really."

For Brodsky, and a handful of other self-proclaimed "wikipedians," strengthening the quality of the massive, web-based resource is deeply personal — especially when it comes to issues like climate change and gender inequality, among others.

The public deserves free and accurate information about issues that shape society, they said, and Wikipedia is the best way to make that possible.

"I'm here as a concerned citizen, basically. That's [what] most of us are," Brodsky said.