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## Internet information-seeking and its relation to support for access to government records

David Cuillier<sup>a,\*</sup>, Suzanne J. Piotrowski<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> School of Journalism, Marshall 328, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA<sup>b</sup> Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers University-Newark, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Public access to government records is essential for democratic self-governance, and attitudes toward that gathering can facilitate or hinder public policy regarding transparency. As more people use the internet for gathering information about their governments and communities, it is unknown whether such online information-seeking is related to increased support for government transparency and the right to request public records. This paper applies a uses and gratification theory approach to examine internet information use and its relation to support for citizen and press access to government records. Three U.S. studies examined media-use correlates with support for government transparency: a paper questionnaire survey of college students ( $N=614$ ), an online survey ( $N=1819$ ), and a random-digit-dial telephone survey of randomly selected U.S. adults ( $N=403$ ). Analyses indicated varying results for television and newspaper use, but in all three datasets reliance on the internet for information was positively associated with support for access to public records. Implications for government transparency in a society increasingly reliant on the internet for information are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Soon after Barack Obama was elected president in November 2008, he announced his intentions to increase government openness through improved responsiveness to public records requests and through technology by providing government contracts, lobbying reports, corporate tax breaks, and presidential records online for citizens to peruse and monitor. On Jan. 21, 2009, a day after Obama took office, he issued two executive orders requiring government agencies to err on the side of openness when considering Freedom of Information Act requests for government records and opening presidential records to the public (White House, 2009). According to his transition website, [www.change.gov](http://www.change.gov), "The Bush administration has been one of the most secretive, closed administrations in American history. An Obama presidency will use cutting-edge technologies to reverse this dynamic, creating a new level of transparency, accountability and participation for America's citizens" (Obama, 2008).

Good government groups responded positively to the Obama-Biden plan for transparency in government ([http://change.gov/agenda/ethics\\_agenda/](http://change.gov/agenda/ethics_agenda/)), and suggested their own proposals for increasing government accountability and transparency, many with a focus on providing more information online and by making agencies

more responsive to public records requests.<sup>1</sup> In the OMB Watch's "21st Century Right to Know Project," endorsed by more than 240 individuals and organizations, Obama was urged to make information more accessible to the public through interactive technologies such as online searchable databases of government expenditures, and appointing a chief technology officer to oversee online transparency efforts (OMB Watch, 2008). This is consistent with the international trend toward increased use of e-government practices and the proactive release of information electronically and otherwise (Holzer & Kim, 2004; Moon, 2002; Piotrowski & Borry, forthcoming 2009).

With three-quarters of the U.S. population using the internet (Pew, 2008), government agencies have the opportunity of increasing citizen knowledge by posting online documents and searchable databases, such as sex-offender locations, road plans, budget information, and restaurant inspections. Unlike other media such as newspapers and television, the internet has the ability to provide a variety of information, including government records, without a gatekeeper. With online documents, citizens do not have to physically visit a courthouse or city hall to gather public records, potentially enhancing civic engagement. In addition to e-government, a key

<sup>1</sup> For a list of 13 different proposals, including from the Center for Democracy and Technology, Center for Progressive Reform, the Federation of American Scientists, National Security Archive, and OMB Watch, see a compilation at the American Society of Newspaper Editors Sunshine Week website, <http://www.sunshineweek.org/sunshineweek/opengroups08>.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [cuillier@email.arizona.edu](mailto:cuillier@email.arizona.edu) (D. Cuillier), [spiotrow@rutgers.edu](mailto:spiotrow@rutgers.edu) (S.J. Piotrowski).

element of transparency is the public's legal right to request specific documents not provided online through the use of the Freedom of Information Act and state public records laws (Fuchs, 2006; Piotrowski, 2007).

While Obama and access advocacy groups point to the people's "right to know" and demands for transparency online, little research has examined the public's attitudes toward access to government records and the relationship to internet use. Some work has been completed on the related issues of e-government and trust in government (see Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), but we are left with a series of questions. What effect does reliance on the internet for information have on citizen attitudes toward government openness, specifically the legal right to request public records? Are those who use the internet for gathering information more likely to support the right to request public records through freedom of information laws because of the value they see in having access to information? Or are they more likely to oppose access to such records because of the prevalence of personal information sometimes included in government documents, such as court records, police reports, and property tax records?

To date, no published research has directly examined the relationship between online information-seeking and support for the right to access government records. This study, applying uses and gratification theory, seeks to fill that void in the literature by examining whether the extent one uses the internet for gathering information is related to support for access to public documents. Understanding the correlates associated with support for government transparency is essential for explaining and predicting public views toward freedom of information, particularly in an age of emerging information technologies (Horrigan, 2006, 2007).

While this study does not address causation, it seeks to take the first step in examining whether there might be a relationship between internet information-seeking use and support for freedom of information. To examine this potential relationship, the authors gathered and analyzed three datasets using different survey modes and different populations – a paper survey of college students, an online survey of community volunteers, and a random-digit dialing phone survey of U.S. adults.

## 2. Support for access to public records

The right to access government records is essential in a democracy to foster citizen trust, deter corruption, and provide basic information for the public, companies, and journalists (Altschull, 1990; Blasi, 1977; Cross, 1953; Florini, 2007; Foerstel, 1999; Meiklejohn, 1948). Citizens require access to information about their government to be able to make informed decisions for the good of the country (Quinn, 2003). James Madison was an early proponent of enabling access to government information (see Madison, 1999).

Citizens have a variety of venues for accessing government information. In her book *Governmental Transparency* (2007), Piotrowski differentiates between four main kinds of public access to government information: 1) proactive dissemination by agencies through press releases, posting documents online, or providing in a library or depository; 2) requester release where citizens and journalists specifically request information from agencies not provided proactively; 3) leaks from whistleblowers and others (e.g., Pentagon Papers case); and 4) open public meetings where information is discussed and released in a public venue.

The amount of information available to the public, however, can ebb and flow depending on a number of factors, including structural pressures within agencies. In his book *Economy and Society* originally published in the 1920s, German Sociologist Max Weber (1968) noted the inherent nature of bureaucracies to be secretive. Political scientist Frances Rourke acknowledged this tendency and argued that "the tradition of disclosure might wither in the shade of administrative

evasion or inertia were it not for the continued exercise of outside vigilance" (Rourke, 1960, 694).

Outside pressures toward openness – or secrecy – can originate from citizens, whose attitudes toward government information, can influence, at least indirectly, public policy, particularly regarding government and democratic principles (McGregor, 2006; Monroe, 1998; Murray & Howard, 2002; Page & Shapiro, 1983). For example, public pressure and advocacy emerging from Cold War secrecy, civil rights, Vietnam, and Watergate contributed to passage of the federal Freedom of Information Act and state public records laws (Archibald, 1993; Uhm, 2005). On the other hand, more recent concerns about privacy invasion and identity theft have led to increased closure of government records (Cochran & Katz, 2003). From 1998 to 2002, the use of privacy exemptions to deny federal Freedom of Information Act requests increased more than 600%, from 55,000 to 380,000 (LaFleur, 2004).

Public fears of terrorism and national security breaches in recent years also have served as the impetus to increase secrecy regarding critical infrastructure, military tribunals, and other aspects of U.S. government (Cassel, 2004; Feinberg, 2004; Gup, 2007; Halchin, 2002; Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002; Kirtley, 2006; McDermott, 2008; Roberts, 2006; Stone, 2007; Strickland, 2005; Waxman, 2004). The courts are increasingly using secret juries, keeping detainees' identity secret, and using secret dockets to hide cases (Chance, 2000; Reporters Committee, 2005; Ross, 2001). The Coalition of Journalists for Open Government studied the amount of information the federal government released through the Freedom of Information Act from 2000 to 2004 and found a 22% increase in the use of secrecy (Coalition, 2005).

In some cases, such as in the dissemination of social security numbers and nuclear power plant schematics, fears may be well-placed and policy reactions appropriate. But in other cases, unnecessary secrecy inhibits the ability of citizens and journalists to identify problems in government, putting public safety at risk and allowing corruption to fester unchecked (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2003; Davis, 2003; Halstuk, 1999; Hoefges, Halstuk, & Chamberlin, 2003; LaFleur, 2003; Reporters Committee, 2005).

While researchers have long studied public attitudes toward First Amendment rights, press rights, and democratic principles, relatively few studies have directly examined citizen attitudes toward government transparency. Some professional organizations have conducted national polls surveying public attitudes toward access to public records, but the measures have been single items and do not include media-use questions (e.g., Freedom Forum, 2002). This study will focus on the second method of information access outlined by Piotrowski: requester-based. For the purposes of this study, support for access to public records is defined as a political attitude expressed with a degree of agreement or disagreement toward a person's ability to acquire government records that are legally disclosable through freedom of information laws. Public records can include any paper or electronic document held by local, state, or federal government agencies.

In previous research, support typically has been measured by asking people how strongly they agree or disagree whether particular records should be made public, such as criminal records, restaurant inspections, and city council minutes (Cuillier, 2004, 2008; Cuillier, Duell, & Joireman, 2009; Driscoll, Splichal, Salwen, & Garrison, 2000; Freedom Forum, 2002; Phelps & Bunker, 2001; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007). Some scholars have found that public attitudes toward access to government records vary depending on a person's demographics and political values, with those who are liberal, male, and interested in community affairs generally demonstrating the greatest support (Cuillier, 2008; Cuillier et al., 2009; Driscoll et al., 2000; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007). Also, the type of record in question is a factor, with the most support for disclosure expressed toward records that have a public safety function, such as criminal incident reports, and the least support for disclosure of records that have a personal

privacy element, such as divorce files (Cuillier, 2004; Driscoll et al., 2000; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007).

No published studies to date, however, have examined support for access in relation to internet information-seeking use. This study attempts to build on previous research to examine media-use correlates with support for access, based on a uses and gratification approach.

### 3. Uses and gratification theory and the internet

Research in internet use and its correlates is still evolving and often conflicting (Delli Carpini, 2000; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2003; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002; Uslaner, 2004). Putnam (2000) argues that people who rely on the internet for political information are less likely to participate in civic and political life than those who rely on other media. Yet a growing amount of research has suggested that internet use is positively related to information gathering, political participation and support for democratic principles (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Pierce & Lovrich, 2003; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; White, 1997).

Much of the research suggests that correlates with internet use depend on motivation and the types of use. Van Dijk, Peters, and Ebbers (2008) found that Dutch citizens were more likely to use government internet services if they were familiar with the services and information available online.

Blumler and Katz (1974) proposed uses and gratification theory, which suggests that people actively search out media messages to satisfy certain needs, rather than being passive receivers of information. In particular, uses and gratification theory suggests that people look to different media to satisfy different needs: escape (e.g., movies), social interaction (e.g., Facebook), identity (e.g., affirming political blogs), entertainment (e.g., gaming), and information (e.g., town construction plans for nearby road projects). Blumler and Katz suggest that being able to seek out and gather information provides people a sense of control.

Unlike traditional media such as television and newspapers, the internet provides users the ability to actively seek out specific information any time and just about anywhere, to fulfill personal needs for information control (Ferguson & Perse, 2000). Scholars increasingly have been applying a uses and gratification approach when studying internet use, examining the multitudes of needs fulfilled by the internet, such as entertainment, social contact, escapism, and information gathering (Kaye & Johnson, 2002; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Morris & Ogan, 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). When someone is gratified by a positive outcome, such as finding government restaurant inspections for their neighborhood or local crime incidents, that should cause further use and efficacy in using the internet for more information-seeking behavior.

It is the proposition of this paper that those who use the internet for information gathering purposes are more likely to view access to government information as important. Previous research supports this proposition. For example, LaRose and Eastin (2004) found that the perceived ability of the internet to improve one's lot in life was a strong factor in use of the internet. Also, internet users are less concerned about privacy invasion and more trusting of information proliferation (Uslaner, 2004).

A growing body of research indicates that internet use is positively associated with political efficacy, political knowledge, and political participation (Kenski & Jomini Stroud, 2006; Pierce & Lovrich, 2003), and higher interest in politics has been found positively related to information-seeking online (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). Those who use the internet for gathering information have higher social capital than those who use it for recreational purposes (Shah, Kwak et al., 2001; Shah, McLeod et al., 2001).

It seems, therefore, that people who use the internet for seeking news and information are more likely to exhibit greater support for democratic principles such as freedom of information because they see the practical value of open government records for understanding the political process and aiding their personal lives. Those heavy users of online information may be disposed to want information about government, including government records, and therefore exhibit greater support for open records.

### 4. Hypothesis

By applying a uses and gratification approach, those who rely on the internet for information are more likely to see the usefulness and benefits of public records and therefore support access to government documents.

**H1:** Support for access to public records will be positively related to using the internet for seeking news and information.

To test this hypothesis, we employed three different surveys among different populations (college students, online community volunteers, and the general public) with three different modes (paper questionnaire, online survey, and random-digit dialing phone survey). This form of research triangulation provides a rigorous test of the hypothesis; detected results across all three studies would indicate that the findings were not a factor of the sample or survey mode.

### 5. Study 1: College students

The first study, conducted in September 2004, is based on a purposive convenience sample that included 612 college communication majors in 16 classes at six universities throughout the United States. The in-class paper questionnaire survey was part of a larger study to assess attitudinal changes toward the First Amendment, press rights, and access, over the course of a semester in different communication courses.

#### 5.1. Sample

While not generalizable to the population as a whole, these participants were helpful for this preliminary study because of the homogenous sample that eliminates a variety of potentially confounding variables. This allows for greater potential to detect differences among media use. Also, this population is ideal for

**Table 1**  
Support for access item means for Study 1 (national college student survey).

	N	M	SD
Records detailing someone's criminal past should be made available to the press.	610	4.90	1.64
Public utility records, which could include how much water people use for their lawns and irrigation, should be made available to the press.	611	4.88	1.66
The press should have access to the annual salaries of public employees.	609	4.83	1.87
Public records that identify the type, amount and location of hazardous chemicals should be made available to the press.	610	4.68	1.99
Public records explaining vulnerabilities of dams should be made available to the press.	611	4.50	1.92
Property tax records, including the value of a person's home and how much was paid in property taxes, should be available to the press.	611	3.91	1.78
Driver's license records, which might include a person's name, address, height and weight, should be made available to the press.	612	3.44	1.84
Divorce court files, which may include family assets and allegations between spouses, should be available to the press.	611	3.02	1.52

All measures on 7-point scales with 1 "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree". Questions were reverse coded so a higher mean indicates greater support for access. Cronbach's alpha = .75.

measuring attitudes of adults who are likely to use the internet and 95% of college graduates use the internet (Pew, 2008).

To account for regional differences, the universities reflected a variety of public colleges from throughout the country, including large research universities and small regional universities, and from different parts of the nation including the West Coast, East, and South. Paper questionnaires were handed out to students in news reporting, media law, and media ethics courses by their instructors. While completion of the survey was voluntary and did not result in extra credit or incentives, when comparing the course enrollment with completed surveys, 87% of the distributed surveys were completed.

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 50, with a mean of 21. The majority (78.6%) were Caucasian. About 68% were women and 32% were men. Most (65.1%) were seniors, followed by juniors (25.6%), sophomores (8.3%), and the rest (1%) freshmen and graduate students. One-third of the respondents reported that they came from families that earned a total of \$100,001 or more a year in household income, 22.4% reported incomes from \$75,001 to \$100,000, and 19.9% from \$50,001 to \$75,000, and the rest less than \$50,000.

5.2. Measures

The survey, which took participants about seven minutes to complete, consisted of Likert-type items, ranging from 1 to 7, designed to measure support for press access to public records and media use. Some questions employed reverse wording to avoid the instrument from taking on an overly positive tone toward access that could introduce response bias. The questionnaire included 38 questions and 14 demographic items.

5.2.1. Support for access

The criterion variable was measured by an index created by calculating the mean of eight questions (Cronbach's alpha = .75) that asked whether the press should have access to specific government records (see Table 1). Some studies, like this one, have focused on the press' right to access records while other studies have examined citizens' right to access records. In general, people tend to support their own right to access public records more than the press' right to access records, but studies indicate that both constructs are closely related (Cuillier, 2004; Driscoll et al., 2000). The benefit of measuring support for requester-based access to government information, rather than support for proactive release through e-government and online dissemination, is that we avoid the problem of multicollinearity, where support for online information would be highly correlated to online information-seeking. What is more interesting to know is whether people who seek online information would express greater overall support for access to government records, separate from the records' availability online.

Questions were derived from previous surveys (Cuillier, 2004; Freedom Forum, 2002). Because most people do not routinely contemplate access to government records, the questions asked participants to indicate their support for press access to specific records, such as criminal reports, dam safety inspection data, and driver's licenses.<sup>2</sup>

5.2.2. Internet information-seeking

Internet information-seeking use was measured by a question that asked participants "On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being not at all important and 7 being very important, please rate how important

<sup>2</sup> Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation indicated two subdimensions, one focused on financial and privacy-oriented records (employee salaries, divorce files, public utility records, property tax records, drivers licenses, and criminal records, Eigenvalue = 3.03) and the other on public safety (hazardous chemicals and dam problems, Eigenvalue = 1.32).

**Table 2**  
Standard multiple regression predicting support for access to public records.

Predictor variables	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
	College survey (N = 614) β	Online survey (N = 1819) β	Phone survey (N = 403) β
<b>Demographics</b>			
Age	.04	.27***	.13*
Gender (male high)	.01	.04	.06
Race (white high)	-.06	-.03	.07
Income	.04	.07**	.12*
Education		.08***	.02
Incremental R <sup>2</sup> (%)	1.0%	9.9%	3.7%
<b>Values</b>			
Political conservatism	-.02	.02	.07
Religiosity	-.08		-.03
Incremental R <sup>2</sup> (%)	1.3%	.1%	.1%
<b>Media use</b>			
Television use	-.18***		.06
Newspaper use	.12**	-.01	.09
Internet use	.10**	.08**	.13*
Incremental R <sup>2</sup> (%)	3.9%	.6%	2.9%
Total R <sup>2</sup> (%)	7.2%	10.6%	6.7%
Total adjusted R <sup>2</sup> (%)	5.4%	10.2%	4.0%

\* Significant at the .05 level.  
\*\* Significant at the .01 level.  
\*\*\* Significant at the .001 level.

each medium is to you as a source of news and information." Respondents circled a number on a 1– scale for "internet," as well as for other media, such as television and newspapers.

Measuring media use is a debated subject as scholars attempt to find reliable methods. This study measured the importance of a medium for news use because of prior research that has found that simple media-use recall measures do not seem to work well (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Kosicki & McLeod, 1990; McLeod & McDonald, 1985; Miller & Reese, 1982; Pinkleton & Austin, 2002; Slater, 2004). Studies seem to indicate that measuring attention or importance, rather than recalled amount of time using the medium, is preferable.

5.2.3. Demographic variables

Participants were asked to designate their age, gender, race, income, political conservatism, and religiosity.<sup>3</sup> Demographics will be partialled out through regression to identify the relationship between support for access and media use. See Table 2 for the variables analyzed in all three studies.

5.3. Results

Standard multiple regression analysis was employed. Demographic control variables included were age, gender, race (white or nonwhite, with white high), income, political conservatism, and religiosity. As shown in Table 2, support for access to public records was positively related to internet use (β = .10, p < .05). While the relationship was small, it was statistically significant.

<sup>3</sup> Race was coded as white (high) or nonwhite (low). Income was measured by asking participants to estimate their family's annual household income (under \$10,000; \$10,001 to \$20,000; \$20,001 to \$30,000; \$30,001 to \$40,000; \$40,001 to \$50,000; \$50,001 to \$75,000; \$75,001 to \$100,000; \$100,001 or more). A question measured religiosity by asking, "Regarding your attitude toward religion, on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being not religious and 7 being very religious, please circle a number that corresponds with how religious you feel you are." Political orientation was measured by a question that asked, "Regarding your political orientation, on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being more liberal and 7 being more conservative, please circle a number that corresponds with your political ideology."

The results of this study supported the hypothesis. The disadvantage of this survey, however, is that college students do not represent the population as a whole. Therefore, a second study was utilized to include a more diverse sample.

**6. Study 2: National online survey**

This study is based on a national online survey conducted in March 2005 of 1819 U.S. adults out of 6044 people enrolled in an opt-in e-mail panel called the eTownPanel (30% response rate). The eTown-Portal is a university-affiliated foundation-funded online research resource that enlists a general population of volunteers to participate in surveys about government and community issues.

*6.2. Sample and procedure*

While the sample captures more diversity and more of a cross section of U.S. citizens than the college student sample, because of the volunteer nature of the panel, the sample is still not truly representative of the overall population. Compared to the 2000 census, the sample contains more women (72% compared to 51% of the population), fewer non-whites (15% compared to 31%), and fewer adults 65 or older (4% compared to 17%). Therefore, the data were weighted for gender, race, and age. Weighting does not eliminate other sources of bias introduced by the voluntary nature of the study, but it is still a useful sample for examining correlates.

*6.3. Measures*

*6.3.1. Support for access*

This criterion measure is different from the first study in that it focused on the right of ordinary citizens, instead of the press, to access public records. As mentioned earlier, previous studies indicate that support for a citizen's right to access public records is similar to support for press access to government records. Also, this online study includes questions very similar to the first study in that they both ask about specific records, such as access to police records and salaries of public employees. Similar to the first study, this 12-item index (Cronbach's alpha = .89) began with the question "For each time below, please indicate whether you think ordinary citizens should, or

should not, have access to such information." Participants then rated each different kind of public record on a 1–5 scale (1 = definitely should not have access; 2 = probably should not have access; 3 = don't know; 4 = probably should have access; 5 = definitely should have access). See Table 3 for items and means.<sup>4</sup>

*6.3.2. Internet information-seeking*

Internet use was measured by a question asking "About how often do you use the internet to get government documents or information?" (often, sometimes, rarely, never). This is similar to the internet question in the first study because it focuses on use of the internet for information gathering, not for entertainment or social interaction.

The survey did not include questions regarding television use. Newspaper use was measured by a question that asked "Do you read a newspaper..." Followed by daily, several times a week, several times a month, only very occasionally, and never. The limitation of the newspaper question in this study is that it simply measures use, not how the newspaper is used. As mentioned previously, this can be problematic because a person may use the newspaper for entertainment or advertisements, not news and information. However, this is less of a problem for newspaper use than for television or internet use, where electronic media are more likely to be used for entertainment (sitcoms, movies) and communication (e-mail, Facebook).

*6.4. Results*

Similar to the first study, multiple regression analysis controlled for age, gender, race, income, education and political conservatism, finding a relationship with internet information use ( $\beta = .08, p < .01$ ). Also, a relatively strong relationship was found with age ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ) and relationships were found with income and education (see Table 2).

The limitation of the online survey and the college student study, however, is that they are not generalizable to the general population. Therefore, we employed a third survey of randomly selected U.S. adults contacted by telephone.

**7. Study 3: United States phone survey**

A random-digit-dial telephone survey was conducted from a western university in February 2006 to measure the opinions of U.S. adults ( $N = 403$ ) regarding access to public records and other issues.<sup>5</sup> The survey was funded in part by a private foundation.

*7.1. Procedure*

The 86-item survey averaged 17 min to complete. Each eligible phone number was called at least six times and the cooperation rate

**Table 3**  
Support for access item means for Study 2 (national online survey).

	N	M	SD
For each time below, please indicate whether you think ordinary citizens should, or should not, have ACCESS to such information.			
The names of sex offenders registered with the local sheriff's office or police department.	1704	4.60	.88
The records of health inspections conducted at local restaurants.	1706	4.55	.82
Transcripts of city or town council meetings.	1709	4.48	.83
City or town budgets or financial statements.	1711	4.46	.85
City or town land use or planning documents.	1710	4.36	.88
Police reports of crimes committed in the local community.	1711	4.35	.96
Records of local government officials' expense accounts.	1699	4.29	.97
Records of government contracts, including the amount and who got the contracts.	1714	4.28	.99
Local campaign finance records, including who gave how much to particular candidates.	1710	4.14	1.10
The names of persons arrested for committing crimes in the local community, and the crimes for which they are being charged.	1714	4.02	1.16
Local real estate records, including the sale price, assessed value and taxes paid on all homes.	1720	3.87	1.19
Employment records, including salary and benefits, of local school officials.	1710	3.68	1.28

Note. Mean responses are on a 5-point scale, with 1 as "definitely should not have access" to 5 as "definitely should have access." Cronbach's alpha for the 12-item scale is .89.

<sup>4</sup> Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation indicated two subdimensions, one focused on financial and operational records (council minutes, employee salaries, expense accounts, government contracts, campaign finance, city budgets, and land-use records, Eigenvalue = 5.75) and the other on public safety and crime (police reports, criminals, sex offenders, and restaurant inspections, Eigenvalue = 1.30).

<sup>5</sup> The 14-day survey started Sunday, February 19, 2006, and ended Saturday, March 4, 2006. A sample of 4538 randomly generated phone numbers of listed and non-listed numbers in the United States, screened to eliminate nonworking numbers, was purchased from Survey Sampling International (despite the prescreening, 20%, or 886 of the numbers, were found to be disconnected, leaving 3652 working numbers). The calling was directed by the author and a paid assistant who monitored calls, and was conducted from a survey phone lab. Callers were experienced undergraduate surveyors employed at a university survey lab, paid \$10 per hour, and some undergraduate students who completed the surveying for extra credit in a research methods course. All callers underwent an hour training session before their four-hour shifts. In order to enhance response, each eligible phone number was called at least six times.

was 24% as calculated by cooperation rate 4 by the American Association of Public Opinion Research (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2008). While not ideal, recent research indicates that low cooperation rates may not detrimentally skew responses, particularly regarding political issues (Curtin, Presser, & Singer, 2000; Groves, 2006; Groves, Presser, & Dipko, 2004; Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, & Craighill, 2006; Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000; McCarty, 2003; Merkle & Edelman, 2002). In general the respondents represented the nation's demographics.<sup>6</sup>

## 7.2. Measures

### 7.2.1. Support for access

The criterion variable, support for access to public records, was measured by a 12-item index developed over several preliminary studies, including the preceding national study of college students (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ). Similar to the college student study, the questions focused on the press' right to access public records, and consistent with both prior studies participants were asked about specific types of public records (Table 4). The responses were measured on an 11-point scale with 0 indicating "strongly disagree" and 10 indicating "strongly agree."

### 7.2.2. Internet information-seeking

As in the first study, internet use was measured by a set of questions that asked participants "On a scale from zero to 10, with zero being not at all important and 10 being very important, please give the number for each of the following media for how important they are to you as a news and information source." Respondents then circled a number on a 0–10 scale for each medium: television, newspaper, and internet.

### 7.2.3. Demographics

Single-item measures collected demographic information for age, gender, race, income, education, conservatism, and religiosity.

## 7.3. Results

Multiple regression analysis, controlling for demographics, found that support for access was related to internet information use ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ). Two control variables also were found to be statistically significant: age ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ), and income ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ).

## 8. Discussion

All three studies, across different populations (college students, online users, and randomly selected U.S. citizens) and different survey modes (paper, online, and telephone), indicated positive relationships between support for access and the use of the internet for gathering news and information. While the effect sizes are small, they remain statistically significant when controlling for numerous other variables, including gender, education, and political ideology. The fact that results were found in all three studies, with different populations and different survey modes, provides further confidence that the findings were not a factor of a particular sample composition or research technique.

**Table 4**

Support for access item means for Study 3 (national phone survey).

	N	M	SD
For the following types of government records, please indicate whether you think the press should be allowed access to them or not.			
Police reports of crimes committed in your community.	403	9.23	1.61
The names and addresses of registered sex offenders.	400	8.59	2.48
Records of local government officials' expense accounts.	401	8.44	2.44
Government records that identify the type, amount, and location of hazardous chemicals.	400	7.93	3.06
The annual salaries of public employees.	401	7.52	3.17
Records detailing someone's criminal past.	395	6.90	2.94
Government records explaining vulnerabilities of dams.	388	6.78	3.44
Public utility records, which could include how much water people use for their lawns and irrigation.	398	6.32	3.31
Local government officials' work e-mail.	394	6.10	3.44
Property tax records, including the value of a person's home and how much was paid in property taxes.	399	5.73	3.58
Driver's license records, which include a person's name, address, height, and weight.	395	3.38	3.41
Divorce court files, which may include family assets and allegations between spouses.	400	3.34	3.01

Note. Mean responses are on an 11-point scale, with 0 as "strongly disagree" and 10 as "strongly agree." Cronbach's alpha for the 12-item scale is .75.

Perhaps people who use the internet for news and information are more likely to see the utility and benefits of access to government records. They may look online for local police reports, court records, restaurant inspections, property tax information, campaign finance data, or sex-offender notification maps. By obtaining these records online, the perceived benefits may lead to increased efficacy, use and support for access. This supports a uses and gratification paradigm.

However, this survey-based study cannot determine causation. Despite controlling for demographics and values, the relationships found in this study might be caused by a confounding variable. Perhaps those who go online for news and information are disposed to support democratic ideals and the free flow of information, as suggested by some scholars (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Katz et al., 2001; Pierce & Lovrich, 2003; Shah, Kwak et al., 2001; White, 1997). Or, perhaps the relationship is bi-directional (Price & Zaller, 1993), where information-seeking online behavior leads to gratification, increasing support for open records, which increases efficacy in further using the internet for retrieving public records.

From a practical aspect for access supporters, this is good news as more people use the internet to gather information (Horrihan, 2006, 2007; van Dijk et al., 2008). The internet could be a positive factor in the future of public attitudes toward access as the internet provides a potential catalyst and medium for political information and participation. Also, the internet may be an effective medium for mobilizing support and sharing information regarding access to public records.

Not surprisingly, this study indicated a positive relationship between support for access and age, income, and education. It could be those who are older and better educated are more cognizant of the need for government transparency. No relationship was found with political ideology and support for access, dispelling the perception that access is supported by liberals and not conservatives.

### 8.2. Policy implications

Implication 1: Make e-government relevant. For government agencies, these results may indicate that as more records are put online and people see the value of the information, then support for government transparency and access to records may increase. From a uses and gratification perspective, to foster civic engagement and political participation, agencies should post information online that is particularly *useful and relevant* to people's lives and then proactively

<sup>6</sup> Respondents were 51% female and 49% male, equivalent to the overall national gender proportion. The sample was slightly older than the U.S. population when compared to 2000 census figures (25% were 60 or older, compared to 20% nationally), more educated (40% had a college four-year degree or higher compared to 25% nationally), and had a higher percentage of Caucasian participants (85% compared to 75% nationally). Because the sample was similar to those in national polls and represented those who most influence public policy (e.g., more educated, older), actual responses were used in analysis without weighting.

advertise it so people are alerted to it. Examples of records that might be useful include those that help in buying a house – road plans, neighborhood crime information (including incident reports), airport noise maps, emergency response time maps, and construction proposals.

Implication 2: Relevance for progression through e-government stages. The e-government literature has coalesced around the idea that e-government implementation progresses in stage (see Layne & Lee, 2001; Moon, 2002). The nature, order, and components of these stages are still being debated. Our findings regarding the use of the internet to gather news information and support for access to government documents may help shape future theory development regarding e-government stages. It is also relevant for practitioners looking to implement different stages of their e-government programs which are relevant to their constituents.

Implication 3: Increase support and funding for e-government. If more people seek information online, it is possible the public's expectations of government transparency will increase, leading to more support for funded information dissemination and e-government efforts. As people use the information more, they will want more information, providing the impetus for increased agency funding toward putting useful records and databases online (Landsbergen, 2004).

Implication 4: Increasing political participation gap. A potential negative implication of our findings is the potential for a widening political participation gap, or knowledge gap, in society. We found that those who are more educated and active in seeking information online are more supportive of access to public records. If those people actually acquire government documents and other information helpful to their lives then they will benefit. Those who do not have internet access may be less likely to see the value of government records and not access information that could help their lives, and they will suffer. This could result in a widening digital divide separating the haves from the have nots (Tolbert, Mossberger, & McNeal, 2002). Government agencies should take an active role in helping citizens from all walks of life utilize the internet – and the helpful resources available online – to close the gap.

### 8.3. Limitations and future research

As noted previously, because this study relied on relational survey research, we cannot infer causation. Future research should employ experiments or longitudinal data to determine whether online information-seeking use causes increased support for access to government records. Also, qualitative interviews and focus groups might identify potential subtle reasons for why information-seeking online users favor access to public records more strongly than those who do not seek information online.

The support for access index is still relatively new and needs further psychometric refinement and testing. A national telephone survey with a larger sample, higher response rate and inclusion of more variables of interest would enable more sophisticated analysis, such as structural equation modeling. Also, the variance accounted for in the regression models was low, indicating that there are other more weighty variables that better predict support for access. Media use appears to account for just a small amount of variance.

An underlying construct, such as need for cognition, political efficacy, apathy, or involvement, could be at play. Future research should focus on other political factors that might mediate support for access. People who are high in need for cognition might seek out information online and be supportive of democratic principles such as access to public records. If that is the case, future research should examine ways of fostering information-seeking behaviors among those low in need for cognition, such as posting documents online that are relevant and useful to citizens' lives. Studies could also continue to identify government documents that people find

most useful and relevant to their lives, which could help government agencies foster trust among their constituents and facilitate information-seeking.

Ultimately, this study suggests that people's support for access differs depending on the media they use, and that use of the internet for information gathering is partially predictive of support for access to government records. In a time of increased government secrecy, citizen attitudes toward freedom of information can influence legislation and court decisions that affect the press's ability to access government records. Knowing who supports access to records, who does not, and why, can help access advocates and policymakers better understand the dynamics of public attitudes toward open government.

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**David Cuillier, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Arizona in Tucson, AZ. A former journalist, Cuillier researches public attitudes toward freedom of information and the psychology of access. He is national chairman of the Freedom of Information Committee for the Society of Professional Journalists, a board member of the Arizona First Amendment Coalition, and research chair for the Law and Policy Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

**Suzanne J. Piotrowski, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor of public affairs and administration at Rutgers University-Newark. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the New Jersey Foundation for Open Government and on the Sunshine Advisory Board for the Citizen Access Project at the Brechner Center for Freedom of Information. Her research focuses on nonmission-based values in public administration, including administrative transparency and ethics. She is author of *Governmental Transparency in the Path of Administrative Reform* and she can be reached at [spiotrow@rutgers.edu](mailto:spiotrow@rutgers.edu).