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An Introduction

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Welcome to the inaugural edition of *The Journal of Civic Information*, a forum for sharing ideas about meeting the public’s need for civically actionable information.

This journal, hosted by the Brechner Center for Freedom of Information at the University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communications, launches at a time when access to reliable information in the United States seems especially precarious. U.S. newsroom employment is at the lowest recorded levels in modern history, and the contraction in the industry – more than 20 percent of newspapers have closed since 2004 – is unrelenting. If people consume news at all, it is increasingly from dubiously reliable and ideologically polarized sources.

Because there are fewer “learned intermediaries” being paid to gather and distribute information to the public, we must make information easier to collect, understand, and use. That theme runs throughout the articles you will read in this debut issue of the journal, and those to come in each successive quarterly edition.

At a time of diminished public confidence in established institutions, both public and private, it is essential for trust to be earned through transparency – or, as tenth-grade Geometry teachers have admonished for generations, “Show your work.”

In coming up with the journal’s title, the word doing most of the lifting ended up being “Civic.” A publication needs an identity, and some guardrails. We intend to focus on the kinds of information that people need to participate in self-governance, broadly defined.

This journal resides somewhere between the immediacy of a blog and the comprehensiveness and rigor of a traditional law journal or peer-reviewed scholarly publication. Its publishing schedule and review process are designed to react nimbly to unfolding developments in technology, law, and public policy. All submissions will undergo double-blind peer review by some of the nation’s top scholars and information experts.

We intentionally created this new publication as an open-access online journal, because it would be ironic to hide this much-needed research behind a paywall or subscription. We also saw a need for a single publication dedicated to civic information research, currently found among various disciplinary publications.

Indeed, it is our hope that this journal will bring together research from across disciplines and methodologies, including law, public administration, journalism, information science, sociology, and any others concerned with the access, dissemination, use, and effects of civic information. This is reflected in the journal by providing a legal analysis section in Bluebook citation style and a social science section in American Psychological Association style. We invite experts from across those disciplines – anyone whose work, as a scholar or practitioner, touches on the technological, legal, and policy issues that arise in managing information for the public’s benefit – to contribute articles or suggest topics.

We are fortunate to launch the journal with four excellent articles – two legal analyses, a survey, and a content analysis – that shed light on access to civic information:

- Communication law scholars Daxton “Chip” Stewart and Amy Kristin Sanders, in the “Secrecy, Inc.” article, provide insightful legal analysis and recommendations for challenging increased civic secrecy through privatization of government services.
- Katie Blevins and Kearston L. Wesner, also First Amendment scholars, examine access to government officials’ communications on social media, including analysis of the most recent court ruling regarding Donald J. Trump’s Twitter account.
- Journalism scholar Alexa Capeloto reports results of a survey exploring the perspectives of government record custodians on the pros and cons of online public records request portals, an emerging transparency tool in the United States.
- Finally, journalism scholar Jodie Gil provides a national look at how state public record laws include or exempt home addresses to protect personal privacy, which informs policy debates in state legislatures.

All of these articles were initially presented at the inaugural freedom of information research competition hosted by the National Freedom of Information Coalition national summit in Dallas, Texas, in April 2019. Other papers presented at the competition will be published in forthcoming issues of this journal.

In addition to the collaborative partnership with NFOIC, we are grateful for Diane McFarlin, dean of the University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communications, for hosting and supporting this journal. The animating principle behind the journal, and all of the work being done at the Brechner Center for Freedom of Information, is to create “practical scholarship” that helps people solve pressing real-world problems.

As Dean Sarah Bartlett of the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism has said, in challenging the field of journalism education to become more agile and less tradition-bound, “if we allow our reverence for abstract academic ideals to paralyze us or make us overly fearful of change, we will become irrelevant.” We hope you will find this journal to be occasionally irreverent and always relevant.

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