

Editor's Note: Five Years of Freedom of Information Research

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Like many initiatives, it all started with scribbles on the back of a hotel bar napkin.

The *Journal of Civic Information* celebrates its fifth anniversary this month as a peer-reviewed open-access online journal showcasing research in the public's access to civic information. Happy birthday!

Through these five years, the journal has published 36 studies and 20 editorials with 15,124 downloads – all free and accessible to anyone (without charging authors a dime). Frankly, it would be ironic to impede public access to the research through a paywall, thanks to endowments at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications' [Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Project](#).

In fall 2017, the newly hired director of the Brechner Center, Frank LoMonte, and I bounced around ideas for a journal at a Nashville conference hotel. LoMonte's vision was to start a journal that was accessible to anyone – in its writing and topics.

"My charge at Brechner was to do *practical scholarship* that equips litigators and advocates to make their best case for open government, coming at it from the background of litigator/advocate and not scholar," LoMonte told me in an email this month.

We also wanted the journal to be interdisciplinary, sharing research across professions, and to cater to different methodologies, including legal, social science, and historical.

During the following year, we would start putting the journal together, going with the name "Journal of Civic Information." It would be hosted at the University of Florida by LoMonte, who would serve as publisher, and he asked if I could serve as editor. Absolutely. We launched our [first issue](#) on Sept. 4, 2019, and have published quarterly since.

To be honest, I was a bit nervous. Research indicates that social sciences suffer the most vanishing journals,¹ and the [struggle](#) of open-access journals is [well documented](#). I had seen other online open-access journals start and then eventually fold. One of my favorites was [Open Government](#), which published from 2005 to 2010.

But we did survive, fortunately, thanks to several key elements:

¹ Mikael Laakso, Lisa Matthias & Najko Jahn, *Open is Not Forever: A Study of Vanished Open Access Journals*, 72 J. ASSOC INFO SCI & TECH 1099 (2021).

- LoMonte, who now serves as general counsel at CNN and adjunct instructor at the University of Georgia School of Law, has more energy than anyone I know in the civic information universe, and he is brilliant to boot. Anything he touches thrives, such as the [New Voices](#) campaign he created at the [Student Press Law Center](#), leading to 18 states that have adopted student press freedom laws.
- The Brechner FOI Project is the only university-based research center in the United States that focuses on access to government information, well supported through \$5 million in endowments collected over 47 years of work. Funding has not been a problem, and the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries provides an excellent [platform](#).
- We had the benefit of partnering with the [National Freedom of Information Coalition](#), where I served as president and founded an annual freedom of information research competition in 2017. That competition continues today – a partnership between NFOIC and the Brechner FOI Project (next winning entries to be announced in late October and presented at the annual NFOIC virtual summit on Nov. 14). Of the 36 studies published so far in the journal, 22 emerged from the competition.
- Amazing authors dedicated to freedom of information have contributed to the journal, sometimes multiple times. The “three-timer club” includes [Benjamin W. Cramer](#) from Penn State, [Jodie Gil](#) from Southern Connecticut University, and [Amy Kristin Sanders](#), who will move from the University of Texas at Austin to Penn State this winter.
- Our brilliant and diverse 15-member [editorial board](#) has provided excellent advice through the years, and dedicated service to reviewing manuscripts.

As a result, the world knows more about the issues facing government transparency, as well as solutions for improving freedom of information. Studies have covered access to police data, the logic behind waiving copy fees, social media posts about FOI, access to legislative records, and many other topics. The most-read issue, posted [December 2020](#), featured four studies examining the impact of COVID on government transparency. (See table below for top-10 reads.)

We have a lot to be proud of as a viable and relatively unique source of transparency research, for authors and readers:

1. We are methodologically diverse. We publish social science, quantitative and qualitative, in American Psychological Association citation style, as well as a section on legal analysis in Bluebook style – all double-blind peer-reviewed.
2. We are disciplinary-diverse, including research from journalism, library science, public administration, history, criminal justice, and much more.
3. We are scholar-diverse, working with experienced researchers as well as doctoral students, law students, or industrial professionals. Authors have represented the United Kingdom, Argentina and Canada. We provide a human approach to working with authors – not just a number or cog in the machine.
4. We don’t charge authors to publish, nor do we charge anyone to access articles. In our mind, open access means open access.
5. We try to be nimble in publication schedules and editing.

We have a lot to work on, however. The journal recently added [two new associate editors](#), A.Jay Wagner of Marquette University and Ahmed Alrawi of the University of Virginia. They will be instrumental in getting the word out to increase reach and impact, as well as submissions. The Brechner FOI Project will soon add a full-time outreach coordinator, which also should help spread the word.

We also plan to update the journal website, making the archives more easily scanned and additional research resources for those looking to find out more about freedom of information. We welcome your input (cuillierd@ufl.edu), your submissions, and your continued readership!

| Journal of Civic Information Most-Viewed Articles | | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Link | Title | Authors | Issue | Views |
| 1 | Casualties of a Pandemic: Truth, Trust and Transparency | Frank D. LoMonte | Vol. 2 No. 1 (2020) | 751 |
| 2 | COVID-19, Death Records and the Public Interest: Now is the Time to Push for Transparency | Amy Kristin Sanders | Vol. 2 No. 4 (2020) | 618 |
| 3 | Transparency and Access in a Pandemic: Understanding the Impact of HIPAA on Government Disclosures | Al-Amyn Sumar | Vol. 2 No. 4 (2020) | 562 |
| 4 | SLAPP-ing Back: Are Government Lawsuits Against Records Requesters Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation | Patrick C. File and Leah Wigren | Vol. 1 No. 2 (2019) | 560 |
| 5 | Agency Perspectives on Online Public Records Request Portals | Alexa Capeloto | Vol. 1 No. 1 (2019) | 557 |
| 6 | Chasing Smokestacks in the Dark: The Amazon HQ2 Quest Revives Debate Over Economic Development Secrecy | Sabrina Conza | Vol. 2 No. 3 (2020) | 551 |
| 7 | Freedom of Information Audits as Access Advocacy | Kevin Walby and Jeff Yaremko | Vol. 2 No. 2 (2020) | 532 |
| 8 | Out from the Curtains of Secrecy: Private University Police and State Open Records Laws | Josh Moore | Vol. 2 No. 2 (2020) | 530 |
| 9 | Behind Bars: Secrecy in Arizona's Private Prisons' Labor Pool | Alyssa M. Petroff | Vol. 4 No. 2 (2022) | 464 |
| 10 | Public Records Officers' Perspectives on Transparency and Journalism | Brett G. Johnson | Vol. 2 No. 1 (2020) | 445 |

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