

THE “PUBLIC” IN PUBLIC RECORDS: REPORTING ON FREEDOM OF INFORMATION  
AS MORE THAN A PROFESSIONAL TOOL

Hilary A. Niles

Mark Horvit, Project Committee Chair

ABSTRACT

This project examines journalistic coverage of access to government information, specifically asking why journalists often fail to report on the public’s access to public records, and identifying best practices for journalists who buck that trend. Eight semi-structured interviews with professionals and academics affirm that reluctance to report on public records stems from multiple factors. Journalists often fail to understand that Freedom of Information is more than a professional tool; it is a public policy and human right that deserves coverage like any other. Also, concerns about breaching objectivity can result in self-censorship, for fear of perceived conflicts of interest since this public policy is so crucial to the profession. These obstacles are exacerbated by an assumption that audiences would find the topic boring. Yet the same interviews reveal a thin but strong and growing lineage of reporters in recent years who have developed this beat as a meaningful way to report on power. As with access to health care, education or the criminal justice system, people care about public policy when they understand how it affects their lives and how they can effect policy change. Journalists who understand the Right to Information as a public policy can seek out stories and provide context to help audiences understand this right and the importance of exercising and protecting it.