

The Art of Access

Acquiring public records for career and life

6-8 p.m. Mondays
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Online via Zoom
SBS Community Classroom

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Welcome!

Access to government information is considered by many as essential for all citizens to adequately self-govern and for improving society, career, and life. This five-week online course examines the history and philosophy of people's ability to acquire public records that can be helpful in buying a home, protecting your neighborhood, researching family history, and holding those in government accountable. Journalism Professor David Cuillier will provide participants with the skills necessary to find and acquire public records, analyze data, and understand the forces in society that are increasing government secrecy in the United States.

Course materials

All readings, recordings, and other materials will be made available on the course's UA Box folder – please refer to your Community Classroom registration confirmation email for detailed information on how to access it.

About the instructor

I am an associate professor in the School of Journalism, where I also served as director 2011-2018. I covered politics as a newspaper reporter and editor in the Pacific Northwest before earning my Ph.D. in 2006 from Washington State University and joining the UA. I research and teach access to records, am president of the National Freedom of Information Coalition, editor of the *Journal of Civic Information*, serve on the U.S. National Archives FOIA Advisory Committee, and have testified three times before Congress regarding FOIA. More information is available [online](#).

Online format

Sessions will be conducted live via Zoom. You will be provided the Zoom address, along with the password, several days before the first class. I encourage attendees to use video. Everyone will enter the session muted to prevent background noise. Through the sessions I will provide opportunities for comments and questions in the chat window, during discussion time and activities. We will also have a break midway.

All politics is local

No doubt politics will come up, given the role of freedom of information in holding government accountable, and the competing interests between transparency and secrecy. As long as we stay respectful it should be a positive experience!

Week 1: Documents for Life



Public records are *your* records. You pay taxes so that government can carry out public functions, and those functions are documented. You are entitled to see those documents, and any other recorded information (video, email, audio, data, text messages) created or held by government employees in doing their public jobs. We call this “freedom of information” or the “right to information.” In this session, you will learn about the myriad of public records that can help you, your neighborhood, and your entire community. This might include backgrounding a babysitter, engaging in genealogy, finding a good house to buy, or holding your public officials accountable. It’s your right!

Readings for today

- *The Art of Access*, by Cuillier & Davis, Ch. 1, “Records that Matter”
- *How to be an FOI Sleuth*, by David Cuillier

Access activity: **Mapping an agency**

Before class, get familiar with public records in your community:

1. Department gleaning

- Google a local government agency of your choice, such as “City of Tucson,” “University of Arizona,” or “Tucson Unified School District.” Go to the agency’s home page.
- Now click through the various departments and services. Note the various permits, licenses, and plans the agency keeps. Look at what they do – there are records that document that work.

2. Forms galore

- Find the search box on the home page (usually a box with a magnifying glass symbol). Type the word “Form” and hit enter.
- Scroll down all the forms that are found on that website. Open some of them up. See the kinds of records that agency collects.
- Go back to the home page and in the search box type “Public Records.” Read the agency’s page explaining how they handle public record orders.

3. MuckRock

- Go to MuckRock.com, a nonprofit out of Boston that helps people order records. In the search box on the top of the homepage, type in the name of the agency you chose.
- Note records that others have ordered from the agency. Look at the correspondence between citizen and agency.

Week 2: Law and the State of Access

Today we focus on the history, philosophy, law and state of government transparency in the United States and throughout the world. We will also examine the ability for citizens to know what their government leaders are up to, including the president, legislators, and local officials. Attendees will understand their rights to acquire government records at all levels of government, and the fundamental reasons that justify those rights.



Readings for today

- *The Art of Access*, by Cuillier & Davis, Ch. 2 “Doc State of Mind”
- *The Art of Access*, by Cuillier & Davis, Ch. 3 “Access Law”
- Arizona public records law, A.R.S. §§ 39-121 through 39-161

Access activity: Legal beagle

Before today’s class, sniff about the [Right to Information Ratings](#) website, where experts at the Centre for Law and Democracy have rated the Freedom of Information laws of the 128 nations that have them. The rating is how strong the laws are in protecting the ability for citizens to acquire government information. Note the following:

1. The top 10 nations. Where does the U.S. rank?
2. What countries have stronger laws than the U.S.?
3. Why might some nations have stronger laws?
4. Skim the [61 indicators](#) used in the rating system. What provisions do you think are most important?

Then, check out the [Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press Open Government Guide](#) for Arizona (or the state you are living in now or most interested in). Skim down the left column to see the various factors in the state public records law. Note the following:

1. How far back does the law go, and what was the point of its adoption (the “Foreword” part)?
2. Do citizens have to explain the purpose for why they want to see records?
3. What agencies are subject to the law?
4. Skim the “Record categories – open or closed.” Do you agree or disagree with any of the exemptions?

Week 3: Acquiring Public Records

They call them public record “requests,” which reminds me of the kitty pictured to the right – begging to see records we already paid for with our taxes. I prefer public record “order” or “requisition.” It’s about having a document state of mind. In this session, you will learn how to submit record orders, overcome obstacles, and develop an understanding of government officials’ perspectives.



Readings for today

- *Honey v. Vinegar*, by David Cuillier
- *Custodians’ behavior*, by Michele Bush Kimball

Access activity: Dream house

This week you can start into what I call the “dream house” activity, which I’ve used in classes for the past 15 years. For the next several weeks you will collect information about a house and neighborhood of your choice, either your own or one you have been contemplating moving to. You will get several things out of this activity:

1. The skills to find and acquire public records.
2. Confidence in interacting with your local government.
3. Records to better inform you about the community you live in.

Go to the instructions in the class drive for details about what records to obtain and how to get them. I encourage you to use the Student Press Law Center [letter generator](#) for your order letters (you might adjust the final paragraph to come across less threatening – your choice). You will collect records for the next two weeks and we’ll share our experiences during the last class. You can continue your record hunt long after the session ends, and I am happy to assist if you run into roadblocks!

Week 4: Dealing with Data

Government records are increasingly computerized (I have yet to run into an agency still using typewriters!), and that means the most useful information is contained in relational databases or other electronic files. In this session, you will learn how to download government information, pull it into a spreadsheet program such as Excel, analyze it, and visualize it using free tools. You can go boldly into this final frontier!



Readings for today

- [Excel Made Easy](#), as well as [32-minute video](#) showing functions
- [Journalist's Toolbox](#), data analysis section, by Mike Reilly (skim)
- *Development of data journalism*, by Melisma Cox

Access activity: **Love, murder, and money**

I have created three data exercises for you to practice at home on your own before class. You can do one, two, or all three. You might get stuck, and that's OK – I will go through them in class so you can see how easy it is to download and analyze data. The three exercises are in the class folder:

1. **Love of your life:** Want to improve your odds in the dating scene this Valentine's Day? Figure out the town to live in to increase your odds. Download and analyze Census data for Arizona to see what towns have the highest percentage of women or men.
2. **Murder you wrote:** Download and analyze FBI crime data to discover what cities in Arizona have the highest and lowest murder rate (no relation to the preceding "Love of your life" activity above).
3. **Dollars for Wildcats:** Download salary data for University of Arizona employees and sift out the fat cats from the feral.

Week 5: Forecast: Cloudy with Chance of Secrecy

You have learned about the philosophy and importance of freedom of information, as well as how to acquire public records for your career and life. This session we will talk about threats to government transparency and the future of our democracy/republic under threat from growing secrecy at all levels of government. We will discuss such factors as privacy, national security, technology, and the declining efforts of news organizations to fight for transparency on behalf of the public. How will we, as a society, protect our right to know?



Readings for today

- *Tipping the Scales*, by Halstuk, Cramer, & Todd
- *Forecasting FOI*, by David Cuillier
- *Seeing Transparency More Clearly*, by David Pozen

Access activity: Sunlight Reflection

After reading through the materials for today, as well as incorporating previous sessions' readings and discussions, and gathering records for your "dream house," think about ways that the Tucson community could build a healthy information ecosystem where citizens can freely access government information and engage with each other constructively and informed. Before class, note the following:

1. What public records do you find invaluable and critical for remaining available to citizens, and why?
2. What *shouldn't* be public, in balancing our right to know with other competing interests?
3. If you had unlimited power and money, what would you do to make government more accessible to you and your neighbors?
4. What steps should local institutions (municipal governments, the university, media, etc.) take to ensure a vibrant and factual flow of community information?