Internet accessibility an important factor in government transparency

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Public affairs experts say easy and constant access by citizens to important government information, referred to as government transparency, is vital for good governance as well as the perception by citizens that the government is trustworthy.

However, many local governments suffer from a lack of transparency. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found that county governments in densely populated urban areas tend to be more transparent on their official websites if their citizens have good Internet access. On the other hand, in counties with large cities where the citizens lack the ability to access the Internet, county governments do not make enough information available to the public. Charles Menifield, a professor in the MU Truman School of Public Affairs, believes that government officials should seek to understand their populations' levels of Internet access and how it relates to other social factors in order to find ways to be more transparent to the public, and therefore be perceived as more trustworthy.

"Transparency is important because it improves overall trust in the government and validates that governance to its citizens," Menifield said. "The difference between the truth and a lie is evidence. If governments can provide proper evidence to citizens that they are governing well, it can improve the possibility of positive interactions between governments and the people."

Menifield says his study identified many factors that contribute to

[government transparency](#) and that government officials should understand their population's demographics, such as minority populations, age and education level first, before searching for ways to improve transparency.

"We identified many factors contributing to an increase or decrease in government transparency, including [internet access](#), education level, poverty level, minority populations and population density," Menifield said. "While it is clear that urban areas with higher levels of Internet access had greater government transparency on county government websites, this does not mean that improving Internet accessibility in every area will automatically improve transparency. It is important for government officials to base their transparency efforts on the needs of their current citizens."

For their study, Menifield and lead author Grichawat Lowatcharin, a graduate student at MU, examined online county government transparency data collected by the Sunshine Review, a nonprofit government transparency advocate, and compared it with demographic data of more than one thousand counties located in 12 Midwestern states. These data were gathered by examining each county government website and evaluating how much information was provided on the website and how easily accessible that information was for the average website user.

The MU researchers found that counties with lower education levels also had lower levels of Internet accessibility, or the ability to use the Internet on a regular basis. Menifield says that simply increasing Internet accessibility in areas like this would not help transparency, as education level is an important factor in whether citizens seek to access government information online.

"For governments to improve transparency in their counties, it really

requires a holistic approach that directly addresses the needs of specific areas," Menifield said. "If a highly educated population in an urban area has low Internet access, then improving that access may improve citizens' abilities to seek government information online. However, in a rural, less educated population, governments may want to seek transparency in other ways than online, or search to improve factors like education and income first."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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