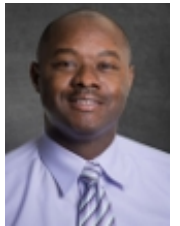


Internet access levels are not the sole determinant of how transparent government websites are.

*Does increased Internet access lead to higher levels of governmental transparency? In new research, **Grichawat Lowatcharin** and **Charles Menifield** assess the impact of geographic, demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional factors on governmental transparency across more than 800 counties in the twelve U.S. Midwestern states. They found that total land area, population density, percentage of minority population, educational attainment, and the council-manager form of government are statistically associated with higher levels of government transparency at the county level via the Internet.*



The Internet has opened a new arena for interaction between governments and citizens, as it not only provides more efficient and cooperative ways of interacting, but also more efficient service delivery, and more efficient transaction activities. This venue provides citizens with far greater potential to observe and understand what is going on in government, as well as improving the boundaries between citizens and state, as well as opening up governmental processes to greater scrutiny.



As access to the Internet increases over time, governments are expected to have more information and readily provide services on their websites. But to what extent does increased Internet access lead to higher levels of government transparency? In new research we examine factors that affect website transparency at the county level in the Midwest region of the US, and testing several other hypotheses related to Internet access and transparency.

While we found Internet access to be a significant predictor of Internet-enabled transparency in our simplest model, this finding did not hold true in our most extensive model. This does not negate that fact that the variable is an important factor in assessing transparency levels and Internet access. A cursory analysis often gives the impression that the greater the extent of Internet access, the higher the level of transparency. However, when taking into account some other factors, the extent of Internet access does not necessarily account for transparency. Suffice it to say that Internet access is dependent on education and perhaps population density.



Credit: Chris Dlugosz (Flickr, CC-BY-2.0)

With respect to the role of government and the notion that transparency is a key to good governance, we perceive that it is important for government officials and scholars to note what sort of factors influence transparency in government. Our findings show that a large majority of the counties in the Midwest region in the United States provide relatively limited information on their websites, and only a small portion provide the most extensive information. Thus, levels of transparency vary widely across the region.

When we consider our hypotheses overall, we find mixed results. Our data shows that total land area, population density, percentage of minority, education attainment, and the council-manager form of government are statistically significant predictors of Internet-enabled transparency. These findings both confirm and negate the findings of previous researchers. For example, while the effect of education on transparency appears to be the most consistent finding in previous research, we also noted that the rural/urban (population density) dichotomy and the education variable are important factors in assessing transparency levels. Hence, as governments create strategic plans that include growth models, they should not only consider the budgetary ramifications of growth, but also the fact that educated residents want more web based interaction with government. This finding was reinforced by a recent [Census Bureau report](#) indicating that some of the cities and counties in Florida and California had population increases greater than ten thousand persons per month during the period 2013-2014.

This article is based on the paper '[Determinants of Internet-enabled Transparency at the Local Level: A Study of Midwestern County Web Sites](#)', in *State and Local Government Review*.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the authors

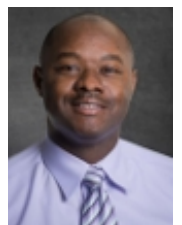
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