



‘If I could go to one place’: examining city-based information practices from the perspective of city residents

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper examines information as an exchange between city government and city residents. The goal is to better understand residents’ perceptions of interacting with city government and to describe their suggestions for improvement, including centralised information hubs.

Method. A qualitative study with 30 city residents in Austin, Texas, U.S.A. includes semi-structured interviews and a member check focus group to explore themes from the information studies and urban studies literature.

Analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the interview data.

Results. Participants express frustration with existing channels for engaging with city government and cite a lack of access to information as a barrier. Participants do not mention open data portals, which cities invest in but are not accessible to those who lack data analysis skills. Participants report that they wish they could go to one place to get information about local issues.

Conclusion(s). Participants suggest centralised information hubs as mechanisms that could improve information exchange between city government and residents. Relatedly, investment in open data portals has not solved the problem of resident engagement in local government; indeed, residents do not even bring up the topic. Combining insights from information studies and urban studies can help to address this gap.

Introduction

This paper examines information as an exchange between city government and city residents. A review of the information studies and urban studies literature reveals suggestions from scholars for city governments to improve efforts to make publicly available information accessible, engaging, and useful. The literature across both fields mostly analyses government activities objectively from the institution's perspective while also recommending greater integration of resident perspectives and experiences. Yet, resident perspectives remain understudied. A qualitative study in Austin, Texas, U.S.A responds to researchers' suggestions to explore residents' perspectives about why they participate (or do not participate) in public engagement activities, including the use of information technology for public engagement.

Results from the study align with the literature in that participants perceive a mismatch between how city government offers information about local issues and policies and how residents would like to provide and receive that information. These empirical findings support scholars' call for more inclusive efforts to increase resident engagement in transforming government processes that recognise how residents live and operate and recognise their participation beyond perfunctory actions. The intended contribution of this research is to present empirical evidence of residents' perceptions and experiences of information exchange with city government to support better public engagement.

Background

While city government exists to serve the public, formal processes and forms do not always align with ways that residents would like to interact (Glass, 1979; Reynante et al., 2021). A review of the literature from urban studies offers insight into the information mechanisms and processes that city government designs, implements and manages to engage the public (e.g., meetings, working groups, surveys, etc.) (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). These mechanisms work in tandem with the varying levels of participation ranging from lower levels where residents are simply informed to co-production where city government shares power with residents (Arnstein, 2019; Fung, 2016).

Efforts to improve and streamline interactions between city government and city residents often include technological applications that each have their own challenges. For example, governments commit significant resources to creating and maintaining open data portals that fail to garner widespread use (Stratton & Hussain, 2023). These portals are held up as promoting resident engagement in city government (Carter & Stratton, 2025), but to date there is relatively little evidence that they are achieving their stated goals. O'Grady & Mangina (2025, p. 2793) suggest that civic open data portals 'cater' to those with technical expertise but are not as accessible or user friendly to the general resident population. Based on a trace data analysis that revealed severe underutilization of data provided through city government open data portals, Stratton, and Hussain (2023) call for '*additional research on what people currently do (and want to do)*' (p. 446) with open government data. This paper explores the parenthetical aspect of what information people want from their government.

The example of open data portals points to a disconnect between government design and uses of technology and resident imaginaries of how they may gain access to information about local issues. Scholars across the information studies and urban studies literature are aligned in their recommendations to further involve residents in determining the purpose, design, and implementation of government mechanisms and processes, including technological ones. Closer collaboration between city government and residents requires a fundamental shift in the administrative mindset to value residents' local knowledge and situated experience (Timney, 1998). Integrating insights from residents can not only benefit how city government designs processes and programs but can also positively impact how government may ethically utilise technology '*in ways that empower and educate people*' (Hollands, 2020, p. 315). Movement in this direction requires

involving residents at multiple points in the technology process and in ways that take their perspectives and experiences into account (Batty, 2013).

In attempts to support local government in bridging the gap between bureaucratic processes and resident experiences, perspectives, and imaginaries, scholars suggest various frameworks, methods, and guidelines (Erete et al., 2018.) Tacheva and colleagues (2022) offer the concept of social justice informatics along with six principles to support information scholars' efforts to integrate more inclusive and equitable ontological and methodological considerations in information and technology research. Urban scholars also offer recommendations to increase public engagement including enhancing communication efforts (Schafer, 2019).

Methods

This paper is part of a larger research study (doctoral dissertation) aimed at better understanding how residents perceive and experience the process of interacting with city government. As part of the full study, the first author conducted qualitative research with residents in Austin, Texas. (population: approximately 1 million). Participant recruitment for the study took place in person at public libraries located across the city's 10 council districts. Fifty-two participants agreed to complete a qualifying survey to validate their city residency, age (18 years of age or older) and to confirm that they were not employees of the city. The qualifying survey collected demographics including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and length of residence, but did not include other descriptors (e.g. educational background, occupation). Those who successfully completed the qualifying survey had the option to participate in a semi-structured interview. Select participants could also take part in a member check focus group that was used to validate the study findings. The first author conducted 30 semi-structured interviews and a member check focus group with four interview participants.

After transcribing and reviewing results from the interviews and focus group, the first author used a thematic analysis process and conducted line-by-line open coding through an inductive approach to identify key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). An iterative process of data analysis resulted in a high-level thematic map. This thematic map informed the focus group script where participants learned about key findings from the study and provided feedback (Birt et al., 2016). The practice of member checking proved successful in offering interpretive and co-constructionist activity with participants. The first author also conducted thematic analysis with the focus group results. The second author reviewed and provided feedback on the results of the analysis.

Each of the 30 Participants received a \$15 Amazon gift card for completing the semi-structured interviews; four of those same participants who also took part in the focus group received an additional \$30 in Amazon gift cards. The institutional review board (IRB) reviewed the research study and determined it to be exempt. The study followed IRB guidelines on interaction with human subjects such as participants' informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Results

Residents' experiences with city government shape how residents access information. One participant who has lived in several large metropolitan areas (e.g., London, Hong Kong) describes her perception that city officials purposefully create barriers to information, *'Your government don't [sic] really want people to understand how your government works... I really don't think your government wants your people to understand things'* (P5). Government documents and processes often use formal language and forms that reflect institutional needs rather than those that could be more easily understood by residents. In addition to the barriers of legibility, another participant explains that the process of engaging with the city is also fraught:

I'm sort of the type of person who works paycheck-to-paycheck, so it takes a lot to have to do anything other than work and then take care of myself... I just get overwhelmed and there's so many steps in having to contact someone. (P25)

While those who have experience, expertise, and motive for interacting with government may be able to navigate the process, it becomes more challenging for people with less understanding of these operations. This example illustrates the disconnect between the official mechanisms that make information accessible and the reality of how residents experience that accessibility.

Access to information becomes a key feature of information retrieval about the city. The participant included in the above section continues, *'I find myself not really knowing who to talk to... It feels a little powerless'* (P25). Not having a clear point of contact to access information impacts participants' sense of efficacy related to public engagement. In this instance, access to information is less understood as a retrieval system and more aligned with meaningful connection to illuminate a path to access that information. The lack of guidance (to information) contributes to participants' perception that they are disconnected from the ability to access information regarding their ideas and/or concerns about local issues.

Socio-technical systems impact public engagement and information sharing practices by enhancing and/or streamlining communication between residents and the city through mechanisms such as email, online surveys, websites, telephonic or app-based systems, and online data portals. On many occasions, this desire for optimization and automation presupposes that a city is a system composed by flows of information. However, technologies intended to deliver efficiency through automating information practices between residents and city government are often articulated institutionally with goal-driven, structured forms that cannot fully capture residents' needs. Another participant suggests that online mechanisms of public engagement could be more convenient than fitting the physical forms and schedules of City Hall. The participant says: *'Online should be a way of contacting the authorities... It would be easier... Just thinking about going downtown to present the suggestion or parking there... I feel it's not worth the effort'* (P28). Again, concepts of access and efficacy, time and effort, emerge, but are not always aligned with city priorities. The platforms that city officials use to share information are not always as open as they imagine.

The ability to access information about local issues impacts residents' connection and desire to engage with city government. Participants mention that having a centralised place to obtain information about issues and activities would support them in making them feel more engaged. One participant says, *'So if I could go to one place and it could tell me, okay, here's where to look, here's what you're actually looking for or here's a way to what to pay attention to'* (P24). Information practices that direct users (residents) about how to access information are important support mechanisms to increase levels of engagement. A lack of confidence on how to navigate confusing government systems can also be a barrier to engagement. A participant suggests that the introduction of a centralised information repository would help him to stay up to date on local issues and would support his notion of public engagement: *'Everybody uses technology more nowadays... It'll help show people "This is where everything is." It's a good place to gather information and put information out.'* (P18)

Concepts of online information archives connect to notions of access. Beyond online repositories, city government can offer guidance on how to access information about local issues. Residents can also access information online and then choose to interact with city staff to express their concerns and/or ideas. This multi-layered configuration of communication nodes expresses an openness to resident input and the desire to be heard by city government. The participant goes on to propose yet another mode of communication with the city: *'It'd be nice if they had a one 800 number or some number or a website that you can contact for questions'* (P9). Participants express the desire for city

government to be accessible to them through the integration of both human and digital forms. It is noteworthy that participants do not mention the need nor the awareness of the city's open data portal.

Meanings and intentions in public engagement can be misconstrued through various forms of in-person or online information exchanges, supporting the need for greater bilateral communication that is not limited to formal government procedures, mechanisms, or technologies. One participant (P4) notes that although there are clear roles within the city for who is authorised to address certain local issues, often absentees are those closest to the issue. Bringing people together who have different experiences and perspectives about a singular local issue can introduce friction but also open avenues to explore new solutions.

Discussion

Both the information studies and urban studies literature recommend greater efforts to increase interaction, participation, and information exchange between city officials and residents (Batty, 2013; Hollands, 2020; Timney, 1998). The results from the study's findings align with scholars' prompts for greater collaboration and dialogue between these two groups but indicate there is more work to be done. If the city has attempted to heed scholars' recommendations to be more inclusive of residents' perspectives, those efforts are rendered invisible to the study's participants. Instead, participants perceive barriers to public engagement related to disinterest on the part of government to make processes and mechanisms more understandable and accessible. Participants (especially those who are more vulnerable and live 'paycheck-to-paycheck') view the process through a lens of stress, procedural challenges, and a lack of self-efficacy.

Participants offer ideas and suggestions for how city government may respond to disconnections with residents including the use of single-point resource hubs (accessible by phone or online) to support better information exchange about local issues and policies. Participants indicate that these resource hubs may streamline ways to gain access to information about local issues. At the same time, they do not mention (and perhaps are not aware of) government-sponsored open data portals which the city claims offer access to information about local activities (Carter & Stratton, 2025). However, known challenges with open data portals include a general lack of awareness and limited access to those who have technical skills to access, manage, and utilise the data (O'Grady & Mangina, 2025). Centralised information hubs still lack the human touch and connection that participants desire.

While participants state the need for additional mechanisms for information exchange to enhance public engagement, they did not mention government open data portals nor smart city technology. The fact that participants did not mention these technologies is not completely surprising as residents are generally unaware of them and their capabilities. This finding does not disregard the need for additional research in resident engagement with city-based technology applications suggested by information scholars (O'Grady & Mangina, 2025). Rather participant insights respond to scholars' recommendations that non-experts (residents) need to be more involved in the conceptualization, design, and implementation of these technologies (e.g., open data portals) (Stratton & Hussain, 2023).

Greater attention to increasing interaction and information exchange between city officials and residents is warranted based on findings from a qualitative study with 30 participants. While the study is small, the impact of the lack of engagement between city government and residents has serious civic and social implications. Residents (as indicated by my participants) are generally not transferring important, relevant, and impactful ideas, concerns, and imaginaries to city officials. This mismatch seems to do a disservice and becomes a missed opportunity to all involved. Residents provide valuable insight and knowledge that can be additive to urban design and

governance policies. In addition, city officials spend time and public resources on digital platforms (e.g., online data portals) that respond to institutional needs but not those of residents.

Thoughtful consideration, review, and integration of frameworks, such as the six actionable principles from social justice informatics, provide much-needed direction for both theoretical and applied research as well as practical implementation by city officials (Tacheva et al., 2022). These principles can extend not only to the digital forms that support public engagement, but also with more general processes related to information exchange (e.g., communication, artifacts, archives, etc.) Special attention should be paid to incentivizing residents to participate in shaping public engagement processes (including digital applications) in ways that are salient and relevant to them. While those who are part of the power system of the city (e.g., staff, elected officials) are compensated for their time, residents volunteer their efforts to share their ideas and concerns about local issues. Residents make investments when they share information with the city.

Conclusion

Findings from a qualitative research study indicate a mismatch between the open data portals that cities provide to serve residents and the actual information and human connection that residents want from their city government. While scholars across information studies and urban studies advocate for better integration of residents and their associated perspectives and experiences in the conceptualization, design, and development of technical and non-technical processes and mechanisms related to urban decision-making, participants reveal that (even if city government has made efforts to work towards these recommendations) they still feel disconnected.

This exploratory research on digital hubs is part of a larger dissertation research effort that examines resident engagement in urban decision-making. This initial research is limited in its scope and focus. Additional research that more deeply engages in the topic of resident experiences and perceptions of information exchange with city government is needed and in additional city locations (beyond Austin, Texas). Also, research that more closely examines city officials' experience in Austin where the research took place (field site) would greatly contribute to a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, participatory design research with both residents and city officials to consider the implementation of social justice informatics would greatly contribute to the fields of information studies and urban studies. Future research seeks to address each of these areas to expand scholarship related to bridging gaps between local government and public engagement with residents.

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