

**Many Will Persist: How Journalists Perceive Threats, Fatigue,
and Willingness to Submit Future Public Records Requests**

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* This paper won first place in the 2025 Freedom of Information Research Competition, hosted by the National Freedom of Information Coalition and University of Florida Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Coalition. Lead author Erin Coyle can be reached at ecoyle12@asu.edu.

Abstract

Journalists' willingness to persist in seeking government-held information is essential in a democratic society that depends on journalists reporting on government activities for people to be able to engage in democratic processes. This study surveys journalists working in the United States to explore journalists' perceptions of threats related to their work, fatigue in relation to requesting public records, expectations of timely fulfillment of their public records requests, and their willingness to use public records in their future reporting. Overall, journalists report high levels of concern about threats to press freedom, legal threats related to their news content, and threats to lose access to public records. Journalists' responses reflect mixed levels of optimism and fatigue in relation to requesting public records. Those who perceived higher levels of difficulty requesting public records tend to perceive a lower likelihood that a public records request would be fulfilled in a timely manner. Journalists with higher levels of fatigue related to requesting public records also are less likely to use public records in their reporting. Fortunately, most journalists who had requested public records still indicate requesting public records is worth the time.

In a democracy, individuals need to receive information essential for them to engage in self-government and make informed decisions.¹ Individuals expect to receive most of this information from the press, which monitors government and holds government officials accountable for their actions (Wagner & Cuillier, 2025; Cuillier, 2017; Kwoka, 2021; Gleason, 1990; Blasi, 1977; Marnell, 1973). Serving this watchdog role that checks abuses of government power (Gleason, 1990; Blasi, 1977), journalists attempt to seek records essential for informing members of a self-governing society, in part, by using state or federal freedom of information laws to make requests for access to government-held records, often called public records (Carlson & Cuillier, 2017).

Unfortunately, a 2025 national survey of U.S. statehouse journalists, who routinely report on government accountability, indicates most respondents have endured “mounting barriers to accessing public information” (Sylvester, 2025, p. 1). Almost 70 percent of these survey respondents report “limited access to records or sources” are their greatest challenges for “holding government officials accountable.” (Sylvester, 2025. p. 1). The elimination of federal positions in 2025 is inspiring additional concerns about challenges to accessing government records (Fu, 2025), continuing a trend for government agencies to have too little staff who respond to freedom of information requests, as news organizations face closures and layoffs (Cuillier & Wagner, 2025).

These concerns follow a trend of declining press freedom in the United States in recent years (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). Reporters Without Borders, an international non-governmental organization that defends press freedom, connects this decrease to multiple

¹ (Wagner, 2022; Posner, 2003; Meiklejohn, 1948)

factors, including the reelection of President Donald Trump, who has insulted members of the press, prevented members of the press from accessing the White House, and taken additional steps that contributed to “a potential crisis for American journalism” (Reporters Without Borders, 2025, p. 2).

Additionally, global factors — a rise in autocratic governments, decline in democracy, reduction in trust in media, and challenges to the economic stability of traditional media — contribute to decreasing freedoms for journalists to access information and places. (Burke, 2025; International IDEA, 2025). Journalists in many countries, including the United States, are enduring threats to their security and legal threats (Burke, 2025; Frech, et al., 2024; International IDEA, 2025).

Considering this context, the purpose of this study is to explore whether journalists working in the United States 1. report having concerns about legal threats related to their news content, press freedom in the United States, and losing access to public records, 2. indicate they have become fatigued (exhausted and cynical) in relation to requesting public records, and 3. indicate whether they have reduced their attempts to access public records. This research applies conceptualizations of concerns about threats (citation withheld for blind peer review; Youn, 2009); fatigue (e.g., Choi et al., 2018); and motivation to engage in protection behaviors (Maddux & Rogers, 1983) to explore whether journalists who report concerns about threats to their press freedom, security, and access to public records have experienced fatigue and modified their public-records-seeking behavior.

Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings

This research is grounded in scholarship from the fields of communication (e.g., Cuillier, 2017; Wagner & Cuillier, 2024; Martin, 2008), law (e.g., Kwoka, 2018; Peltz-Steele, 2012; Posner, 2003; Blasi, 1977), and psychology (e.g., Maddux & Rogers, 1983). The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings for this paper are democratic theory (e.g., Posner, 2003; Meiklejohn, 1948), the watchdog and checking functions for the press (e.g., Gleason, 1990; Blasi, 1977), protection motivation theory (citation withheld for blind peer review; Maddux & Rogers, 1983;), and fatigue (citation withheld for blind peer review; Choi et al., 2018).

Democratic Theory and the Watchdog Role for the Press

Members of the press have long traditions of seeking information about how government actors perform their jobs, reporting on government and governance, and advocating for better access to information stored in government records to help members of society learn about government officials and actions (e.g., Gleason, 1990; Martin, 2008). Such efforts relate to democratic theory (e.g., Posner, 2013; Meiklejohn, 1948) and a watchdog role for the press (e.g., Gleason, 1990).

In a democracy, self-governing people exist in the same class as their governors. Government is established through the consent of a majority of the citizenry (Meiklejohn, 1948). Democracy requires people to select government officials and to engage in deliberation regarding government officials and government actions (Posner, 2003). This political model assumes that people may make quality decisions due to a variety of community members discussing and debating information relevant to laws, policies, and government officials (Posner, 2003; Meiklejohn, 1948). Through critical inquiry, people may form public opinion and provide government officials with important feedback on laws and policies (Posner, 2003).

Scholarship usually traces the conception that people have a right to know about government actions to news leaders, especially to the executive director of the Associated Press in the 1940s, Kent Cooper, who said in a speech, “There cannot be political freedom in one country, or in the world, without respect for the ‘right to know’” (O’Brien, 1981, p. 2). Yet, Herbert Brucker, executive editor of the Hartford Courant, stated that attorney Harold Cross had used the term since the 1930s, and Cross made the term more popular with a book on legal access to public records in 1953 (Uhm, 2008). Three years later, James Russell Wiggins, executive editor of the *Washington Post* and *Times Herald* addressed the right to know in his book, *Freedom or Secrecy*. Wiggins proposed that citizens in the United States had a “‘right to know,’” which included “‘the right to get information’” and “‘the right of access to facilities and material essential to communication’” (O’Brien, 1981, p. 3). This reasoning is close to First Amendment scholar Thomas Emerson’s (1976) conception of the right to know in a system of freedom of expression, connecting a right to receive information and to be informed to a right to communicate. Conceptions of such a right to overcome government secrecy and expect transparency, however, has not always been part of U.S. culture or law (Schudson, 2015).

The framers of the U.S. Constitution did not clearly define rights to access government-held information in this document that established the overarching framework of the U.S. federal government (e.g., Stewart, 1975). After World War II, editors, publishers, broadcasters, journalism professional organizations, and political leaders wishing for greater government transparency advocated for state and federal legislators to enact or modify statutes that would clarify rights for people to seek and receive access to information held in government records, often referred to as public records (Kwoka, 2021; Schudson, 2015; Erickson, 2014; Martin, 2008;

O'Brien, 1981). News leaders launched a right to know movement that connected rights for people to be informed about government activities to the First Amendment and the intentions of the nation's founders (Wagner, 2022; citation withheld for blind peer review).

Emerson (1976) conceives of the right to know within a system of freedom of expression, connecting a right to receive information and to be informed to a right to communicate. Other First Amendment experts recognize the importance of having the press receive information for the press to serve essential functions in a democratic society (e.g., Stewart, 1975; Blasi, 1977). Press freedom scholar Timothy Gleason (1990) also identifies a watchdog citizenry, responsible for monitoring government and addressing government actions, as "a powerful component of freedom of the press in the United States (p. 110).

First Amendment theory recognizes important roles for the institutional press to report on government, as journalists act as watchdogs and serve as checks against potential abuses of power (Stewart, 1975; Blasi, 1977). Associate Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1975) describes First Amendment protection for press freedom as a "structural provision," primarily designed to create an independent authority outside the federal government "as an additional check" on the government (p. 634). The press receives autonomy to serve as a "formidable check on official power" (Stewart, 1975, p. 643). Despite such essential contributions to democratic society, the press does not receive special rights to access government-held information (e.g., Gleason, 1990; Stewart, 1975).

Watchdog journalism, or accountability journalism, provides independent monitoring of powerful institutions, including the government (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). Journalists seek access to information, ask questions, and investigate powerful institutions' activities to inform

members of the public and government leaders about matters of public concern (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). Journalism professors Sandy Davidson and Betty Winfield (2007) describe journalism as “the lifeblood of democracy” that ensures members of the public receive information about government actors and actions (p. 30).

Free expression scholar Vincent Blasi (1977) connects freedom of speech, press, and assembly to the checking value, under which free expression and assembly provide accountability for public officials’ abuses of power. Blasi grounds this function in the federal constitution, the constitution for each state in the nation, and a presumption that people and human institutions tend to harm others. Such tendencies and capabilities to cause harm necessitate a “counterforce to government power,” particularly a counterforce that can scrutinize government misconduct and inform members of society (Blasi, 1977, p. 527).

Thus, this study assesses whether journalists perceive freedom of information laws as legal instruments journalists are willing to use to gather details about the activities of government, a powerful institution, and promote government transparency.

Freedom of Information Laws and Press Access to Government Records

State freedom of information laws and the federal Freedom of Information Act were enacted and amended to enable members of the public, and thus the press, to request access to government-held information (e.g., Johnson, 2023; Fink, 2018; Martin, 2008). According to legal scholar Margret Kwoka (2016), the federal law was “designed largely by journalists, for journalists, and with the particular goal in mind that journalists would use access to government information to provide knowledge to the public, which would, in turn, facilitate the public’s effective participation in democratic governance” (p. 1371).

Freedom of information laws typically provide for a presumption of openness for records applicable to government operations. Each legislative body has created a specific scope for its respective law, identifying the government agencies and materials covered, circumstances under which government employees may choose not to disclose records to requesters, and deadlines for responding to requests (Fink, 2018; Peltz-Steele, 2012). Still, journalists report government agencies have not met deadlines for responding to requests or have delayed releasing information beyond periods in which information would be useful for journalists (e.g., Chicago Headline Club, 2011; *Delayed, Denied, Dismissed*, 2016), and records requesters have endured challenges from delays, heavy redaction of information, fees for copying and preparing records, as well as having their public records requests ignored (Cuillier, 2017).

Journalism scholar Shannon E. Martin (2008) asserts that a tradition of access has developed over time as well as a tradition “of selective closure about which kind of government information is available for a public inspection and what should be kept from those who may ask for a particular document, record, or dataset” (p. 17). Due to a special relationship between members of the news media and government employees who determine whether government-held information ought to be disclosed, journalists at times access documents not available to other people. At other times, non-journalists more readily access government-held records than do members of the news media (Martin, 2008).

Scholarship also documents a sometimes-challenging relationship between journalists and public information officers, who often may determine whether journalists access government-held information (Carlson & Cuillier, 2017). A survey of journalists who cover state

and federal agencies indicates that most respondents agree with an assertion that ““The public is not getting all the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists’ reporting practices.”” (Carlson & Cuillier, 2017, p. 206). Government employees have withheld public information from journalists during the Twenty-First Century (e.g., Hamilton, 2016; Kirtley, 2006). In parallel, access to public information generally has declined in recent years (Cuillier, 2017).

Research indicates journalists submit a small percentage of freedom of information requests (e.g., Kwoka, 2018; Silver, 2018); lawyers, corporate employees, and academics also are using freedom of information laws to seek public records (Wagner & Cuillier, 2025). Recent research presumes that journalists’ abilities to seek public information to serve the right to know likely will decrease due to economic challenges in the news industry (Wagner & Cuillier, 2025). Nonetheless, journalists’ experiences with public records requests are important to study (e.g., Wagner & Cuillier, 2025; Silver, 2018).

Attempting to access public records is increasingly important as government leaders limit how government employees may communicate with journalists (Wagner & Cuillier, 2025; Marin et al., 2024; LoMonte, 2019). Findings from a recent survey of 303 public records requesters, including 113 journalists indicate journalists are “largely unsatisfied requesters” in a system where freedom of information laws work best for public records requesters with “abundant resources and legal expertise” (Wagner & Cuillier, 2025, p. 341).

Thus, this study asks:

RQ1 How have journalists perceived the difficulty of requesting access to public records in recent years?

RQ2 How have journalists perceived the likelihood that a request for public records would be fulfilled in a timely manner?

H1 Journalists who have perceived a higher level of difficulty requesting access to public records will perceive a lower likelihood that a public records request would be fulfilled in a timely manner.

Concerns about Threats and Behavior Modification

Journalists recently have faced political, legal, and security threats (e.g., Reporters Without Borders, 2025), as well as challenges to their abilities to access government information from “mounting barriers” (Sylvester, 2025, p. 1). This study applies scholarship on protection motivation theory and fatigue to explore journalists’ awareness of such threats and behavior related to such threats (Agozie & Kaya, 2021; Choi et al., 2018; Maddux & Rogers, 1983).

Protection Motivation Theory

Protection motivation theory proposes that behavior to protect oneself against threats relates to one’s awareness of threats, one’s perceived abilities to cope with potential threats, and one’s perceived self-efficacy (citation withheld for blind peer review; Maddux & Rogers, 1983). Behavior change may follow one’s awareness of threats in relation to one’s perception of the severity of threats, one’s perceived abilities to cope, one’s abilities to perform behaviors to protect oneself, and one’s motivation for change (citation withheld for blind peer review; Maddux & Rogers, 1983). Individuals’ evaluations of threats and actions they may take to cope with threats “form an individual’s protection motivation” (citation withheld for blind peer review, p. 272; Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 2000).

Recent scholarship on privacy risks uses surveys to assess individuals' awareness of potential threats via identifying levels of concerns about potential threats and changes in behavior (citation withheld for blind peer review; Youn, 2009). In a survey of adolescent internet users, levels of privacy concerns about online privacy risks are categorized as motivation for coping behaviors and risk-managing behaviors (Youn, 2009). Participants' levels of privacy concerns tend to directly relate to adoption of coping behaviors (Youn, 2009).

This study applies protection motivation theory to assess threat awareness and willingness to make public records requests among journalists working in the United States.

RQ3 How do journalists working in the United States identify their levels of concerns about threats?

Fatigue

When barriers prevent people from effectively completing tasks, people may experience "frustration, hopelessness, and disillusionment," contributing to cynicism as well as emotional exhaustion – the components of fatigue (Agozie & Kaya, 2021; Choi et al., 2018, p. 43).

Individuals may feel fatigued when they are in challenging situations. Inabilities to complete tasks contribute to "psychological strain," which makes decision-making more challenging.

Individuals may feel exhausted and overwhelmed as decision-making becomes more challenging (Choi et al., 2018, p. 43).

To evaluate fatigue in relation to online privacy behavior, Choi et al (2018) asked survey participants about their privacy concerns, burnout, and intentions to engage or disengage in future behaviors involving privacy risks. Choi et al (2018) explain that people with high levels of concerns are more likely to engage in privacy-protecting behaviors. Some people with privacy

fatigue engage in protecting behaviors, and others disengage, suggesting people with higher levels of fatigue tend to devote less energy to decision-making (Choi et al., 2018). Fatigue also relates to disengagement, indicating people with higher levels of fatigue were less likely to take steps to protect themselves against potential threats (2018).

Scholarship also applies the concept of fatigue to evaluate transparency about privacy information in e-government, finding that lower amounts of transparency increased emotional exhaustion and cynicism behavior, reducing the likelihood of people to perform privacy-protecting behavior (Agozie & Kaya, 2021). Exhaustion inspires tendencies for people to “abandon the pursuit of a task” or accept a “default option” rather than take steps to complete a task (Agozie & Kaya, 2021, p. 5). Failing to complete a task tends to contribute to cynicism as well as exhaustion (Choi et al., 2018, p. 43). Cynicism and exhaustion tend to decrease individuals’ perceptions of their self-effectiveness, and decreased self-effectiveness tends to decrease individuals’ effectiveness in completing tasks. (Choi et al., 2018).

This study applies the concept of fatigue previously applied to online privacy-protecting behaviors to explore whether fatigue influences journalists’ behaviors related to seeking public records.

RQ4 How do journalists indicate they perceive their levels of fatigue?

RQ5 How do journalists indicate whether they perceive their willingness to seek public records has changed in recent years?

H2 Journalists who perceive higher levels of threats will have higher levels of fatigue.

H3 Journalists with higher levels of fatigue will have lower levels of willingness to seek public records.

Method

To answer the research questions and address the hypotheses, the researchers conducted a national survey of journalists who work in the United States. Potential respondents were identified using the Cision media contact database, which was searched for those whose job role was listed as “Reporter/Writer.” This search yielded 26,605 front-line reporters working in newspapers, online publications, magazines, television, radio, and as freelancers. A random sample of half of these reporters were invited by email to participate in the survey in September 2025.

Participants were asked to verify they were over 18 and were working journalists in the U.S. This survey received 540 responses, of which 505 were complete, yielding a response rate of 4.1%. Respondents were 48% female, 49% male, and 3% other. They were 75% white, 6% Hispanic or Latino, 4% Asian and 4% Black. They reported a median income level of \$90,000-\$120,000, and 92% held a bachelor’s (65%) or master’s (27%) degree. These demographics place journalists as more highly educated, white, and wealthy than the general population of the United States, but these figures are similar to findings from other research on U.S. journalists (e.g., Willnat et al., 2022).

The survey instrument was developed based on previous literature, especially surveys conducted by Choi et al. (2018), Cuillier (2017), (Cuillier & Wagner, 2025), Wagner (2022), Wagner and Cuillier (2024), Wagner and Cuillier (2025), and (citation withheld for blind peer review). Questions and concepts were adapted to suit the needs of this survey; specific wording is described below as results are presented. The research questions and hypotheses were answered using descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations.

Results

About 77% (N = 401) of respondents reported that they had ever requested public records; 118 (23%) had never submitted a request. This study focuses only on those who have submitted a records request. Among this group, 230 had submitted a request to federal agencies; 331 to state agencies; and 359 to local agencies. These categories are not mutually exclusive; about 36% (N = 195) reported having made requests at all three levels of government.

To answer the first research question, journalists were asked to address, “In the last few years, you perceive that requesting and receiving public records has become:” with responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = Much more difficult to 5 = Much easier (M = 2.32, SD = .80). Only 4% of respondents said that requesting public records had become easier or much easier (N= 15); 40% of respondents replied that it was neither easier nor more difficult, and 40% reported that requesting public records has become somewhat more difficult. About 16% of respondents (N = 64) reported that requesting public records has become much more difficult. This indicates most reporters held a neutral or negative assessment of how requesting difficulty has changed.

To answer the second research question, journalists were asked to address, “In the last few years, you perceive the likelihood that a request for public records would be fulfilled in a timely manner to have:” with responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = Much less likely to 5 = Much more likely (M = 2.32, SD = .92). Only 8% of respondents (N = 30) reported an increase in their forecast; 37% said the likelihood of receiving the records had neither increased nor decreased; and 34% reported it had decreased somewhat, with 21% saying it had

decreased greatly. This indicates most respondents perceived some decrease in the likelihood of receiving their public records requests.

The first hypothesis expects that journalists who perceived a higher level of difficulty requesting public records will perceive a lower likelihood that a public records request would be fulfilled in a timely manner. There is a significant positive correlation ($r = .641, p < .001$) between reporters' assessment of the difficulty of requesting public records and their assessment of whether their requests would be fulfilled. This suggests strong support for H1, that journalists who perceive requesting public records has become more difficult also assess their requests as unlikely to be fulfilled.

For the third research question, journalists' threat perception was measured by their agreement with statements that they are concerned about: "press freedom in the United States," "facing legal threats related to my news content," and "losing access to public records that are important for my reporting" on a five-point scale. Responses to these three statements were summed and divided by 3 to create a scale for level of concern ($M = 4.12, SD = .79, \alpha = .71$). In response to the third research question, overall, journalists reported high levels of concern. Journalists were most concerned about press freedom in the United States, with 73% reporting they strongly agree and another 19% reporting they agree (92% total). Journalists were least concerned about facing legal threats related to their own news content, but still 61% reported they agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (23%). About 80% of journalists reported that they agree (32%) or strongly agree (48%) that they're concerned about losing access to public records important for their reporting.

To answer the fourth research question, journalists were asked their agreement on a five-point scale with the following statements, based on a modified scale from Choi et al. (2018): “Requesting public records isn't worth the time it would take,” “I'm tired of requesting public records,” “Requesting public records slows down the reporting process,” and “Requesting public records isn't feasible in most reporting situations.” Their responses were coded so that 1 = Strongly agree and 5 = Strongly disagree, so that lower values indicate lower levels of fatigue. These were summed and divided by 4 to create a scale of public records request fatigue ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .90$, $\alpha = .71$). Levels of fatigue vary approximately normally among journalists. Their responses suggest some idealism or optimism, with 73% of respondents disagreeing (30%) or strongly disagreeing (43%) that requesting public records isn't worth the time. Only about 22% of respondents agreed (16%) or strongly agreed (6%) that they're tired of requesting public records. But a large majority agreed (43%) or strongly agreed (27%) that requesting public records slows down reporting processes. And nearly as many agreed (41%) as disagreed (51%) that requesting public records isn't feasible in most cases.

To answer the fifth research question, journalists were asked, “Compared with a few years ago, do you consider yourself now more or less likely to use public records requests in your reporting?” with responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = Much less likely to 5 = Much more likely ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.03$). About half (48%) of respondents said their intentions had not changed; 24% said they were somewhat less likely or much less likely to request public records, and 32% said they were somewhat more likely or much more likely to request public records. This indicates most reporters perceived little difference in their intentions to request public records compared with a few years ago.

The second hypothesis was that journalists who perceive higher levels of threats will have higher levels of fatigue. Bivariate correlations show no relationship between journalists' level of concern and their level of fatigue ($r = .031$, $p = .547$). This hypothesis is not supported.

The third hypothesis was that journalists with higher levels of fatigue will have lower levels of willingness to use public records in their reporting. Bivariate correlations show that journalists who reported higher levels of fatigue also reported lower likelihood to use public records in their reporting ($r = -.267$, $p < .001$), offering support for the third hypothesis.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this research have important implications for a democratic society that depends on journalists to access government-held information and act as watchdogs (e.g., Gleason, 1990; Davidson & Winfield, 2007). Although journalists' responses reflect little optimism for improvements in receiving timely access to public records and high levels of concerns about threats, most respondents for the present study still perceive public records requests as feasible reporting tools. Most perceive requesting public records to be worthy of the time it takes to submit requests. Thus, respondents' perceptions of the usefulness of public records and willingness to use them suggests many journalists are determined to keep requesting public records, although they perceive access as decreasing somewhat in recent years.

The present research also echoes findings from previous scholarship that too few journalists are frequently using public records requests (e.g., Silver, 2018); almost one-fourth of journalists who completed the survey for the present study have not ever submitted a public records request. Previous publications acknowledge challenges from denials of requests for

public records and delayed responses to records requests (e.g., Silver, 2018; Cuillier, 2017; Delayed, denied, dismissed, 2016), and the present study finds similar results. Just over half of respondents perceive that requesting public records has become more difficult in recent years. Additionally, slightly more than half of respondents indicate their expectations for having public records requests fulfilled in a timely manner has decreased in the last few years, and more than a third report their expectations have neither increased nor decreased. Thus, journalists show little optimism for requesting records to become easier or for fulfillment of requests in a timely manner. Significantly, journalists who believe requesting records has become more challenging to access also expect their requests to be unlikely to be fulfilled in a timely manner.

Journalists' responses also indicate journalists are highly concerned about threats. More than 90 percent of respondents are concerned about "press freedom in the United States," and four-fifths report concerns about "losing access to public records." Over sixty percent of respondents also report concerns about facing legal threats regarding their news content. Journalists' responses relate to reports about decreases in press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2025) and decreases in access to public records in the United States (Sylvester, 2025; Cuillier, 2017). The World Press Freedom Index ranks press freedom in the United States as 57th of 180 nations around the globe (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). This nation's ranking was 43rd in 2017, during Trump's first term as President of the United States (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Journalists' perceptions of threats are particularly concerning in the current political and economic climate (e.g., Cuillier & Wagner, 2025; Sylvester, 2025).

Seemingly counter to findings from previous studies that found high levels of threat awareness in relation to fatigue (e.g., Choi et al, 2018), the present study finds journalists

perceived concerns about threats are not correlated to fatigue. Responses to an item designed to assess emotional exhaustion does not reflect exhaustion from most respondents. Fewer than one-fourth of respondents are tired of requesting public records. Yet, responses to items designed to assess cynicism yield mixed results, with almost three-fourths of respondents disagreeing with a statement that it isn't worth their time to request public records, 70 percent of respondents agreeing with a statement that requesting public records slows down reporting, and just over 40 percent agreeing with a statement that requesting records is not feasible in most cases. Yet, similar to Choi et al.'s (2018) findings, the journalists who report high levels of fatigue indicate less likelihood to use public records in their reporting.

Perhaps not surprisingly, considering that most journalists' responses do not reflect consistent levels of exhaustion or cynicism, a majority of respondents report their willingness to request public records generally has not changed in recent years, despite delays and other potential threats to the success of their requests. Journalists' commitment to persist in seeking government-held information is essential for the press to serve its watchdog role (e.g., Stewart, 1975; Gleason, 1990), meeting the public's right to know (e.g., Emerson, 1967; Marnell, 1973; O'Brien, 1981) by providing the public with information essential for self-government (Meiklejohn, 1948). As previous research states that journalists have continued to use the Freedom of Information Act to request government information despite the weaknesses of the FOIA (Silver, 2018), journalists' responses to the present study reflect some hope that journalists will persist in their pursuit of public information, despite "mounting barriers" to journalists' efforts to receive government information (Sylvester, 2025, p. 1) and general dissatisfaction as public records requesters (Wagner & Cuillier, 2025).

Still, this research suggests it is important for journalists, public information officers, legislators, and freedom of information advocates to communicate about challenges related to access to government-held information and ways to improve access to public records in a timely manner. Considering that 70 percent of journalists indicate that requesting public records slows down reporting and more than forty percent indicate that requesting public records typically is not feasible, discussions among journalists, government employees, legislators and freedom of information advocates should address how to amend existing laws and how to provide government employees with technology and other resources to expedite fulfilling public records requests.

Limitations and Future Research

While this research has potentially important theoretical implications due to being the first study to apply protection motivation theory (Maddux & Rogers, 1983) and fatigue (Choi et al., 2018) to freedom of information research, this research also has limitations. This research assesses threat awareness and motivation for behavior change, but it does not assess perceived abilities to cope with potential threats, and perceived self-efficacy (Maddux & Rogers, 1983). Future research could also assess perceived abilities to cope with threats and perceptions of self-efficacy to further refine the application of protection motivation theory to freedom of information research (Maddux & Rogers, 1983). Additionally, although the measure of fatigue for the present study, modified from Choi et al. (2018) passed a reliability test, patterns in responses suggest this measure could be refined to more clearly reflect emotional exhaustion and cynicism. Future research could incorporate additional measures for emotional exhaustion and cynicism to further assess potential fatigue in relation to nonfulfillment or untimely

fulfillment of public records requests. The present research also does not evaluate whether journalists' perceptions of access to public records relates to their tendencies to request records at federal, state, or local levels. Future research could use interviews of journalists or open-ended questions to evaluate such potential relationships. Interviews or open-ended questions also could shed additional light on journalists' perceptions of likelihood to receive public records requests in a timely manner, threats, fatigue, and willingness to request public records.

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