App could make government access easier

By By Alexa Capeloto, Columbia Journalism Review

Navigating government bureaucracy is painful, but filing Freedom of Information requests can be downright torturous—for journalists and members of the public alike. Requests might be ignored, bounced around, pegged with impossible price tags, or subject to other machinations while requestors wait (and wait) for a response.

Save a little sympathy, though, for the civic staffers inside the walls of government who face their own struggle: floods of FOI requests, many of them overly broad or duplicative, outdated paper-based processing, and no real communication or tracking across departments. The torture can go both ways.

So, too, can the tech-minded attempts to alleviate it. Open-source web applications like FOIA Machine and Alaveteli have built followings among records requestors. Now, another web app is drawing notice for its potential to help government agencies process, track, and release requested information through a public online portal—creating a new level of transparency for governments willing to embrace it.

Called RecordTrac, the system officially launched a year ago in Oakland, and is getting noticed in cities around the country, on up to the White House.

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