



The Audacity of Archived Video Clips

Posted by [Mick Dumke](#) on Mon, Mar 15, 2010 at 8:30 PM

The scene was rather strange.

Room 201A in City Hall is typically a place where aldermen gather for committee meetings, which is to say it's where they gather to discuss and vote on legislative proposals whose future has almost always been determined ahead of time. Most major legislation before the council comes from the office of Mayor Daley, who also selects which aldermen sit on which committees, [who chairs those committees](#), and therefore how robust an agenda they can pursue, if they're allowed to pursue [any at all](#).

That's also the room where Mayor Daley holds his press conferences after City Council meetings—where he lists his accomplishments and deflects most of the tough questions by [being funny, getting angry](#), or veering off on a tangent that's just [too bizarre and entertaining](#) to interrupt.

On Monday morning, though, the room was the setting for a far different sort of assembly: City Clerk Miguel del Valle and a bunch of good government types told reporters about steps they're taking to make the council's dealings easier to follow and easier to evaluate. They even talked about what else they'll do to keep aldermen in line.

"One of my goals is to bring more transparency and accountability to city government," del Valle said.

"It's important as citizens that we are able to hold them accountable and that we are able to see exactly what they do, how they do it, and whether they are truly representing us," said [Dick Simpson](#), a UIC political science prof and former alderman.

"You cannot have accountability without transparency," added Andy Shaw, executive director of the [Better Government Association](#). "It is not an accident that more than 30 members of the Chicago City Council have been indicted and convicted of corruption over the years, and over those same years it has been government behind closed doors, in the dark. Sunlight is the best disinfectant."

The talk of corruption crackdowns and power to the people was inspired by del Valle's announcement of a seemingly modest new feature on the city clerk's Web site: [archived videos](#) of full council meetings from October to the present.

"Today is a huge step forward," Shaw said, "but we have a mile or two more to go."

Indeed, progress is relative.

Del Valle surprised some liberals and independents—and outraged others—when he agreed to let Mayor Daley [appoint him city clerk](#) in 2006. Why, the skeptics and critics wondered, would a guy who'd spent years earning a reputation as a policy wonk and independent operator let himself be used as a campaign prop for a mayor eager to prove his administration isn't rotten to the core?

Of course, del Valle had a different take. "The way I read this is that the mayor wanted the [clerk's] office to be put back on track," [he told me in an interview last year](#). "This was one headache he wanted to get rid of. The timing was good for him and it was good for me. It has been a very positive working relationship."

In three and a half years on the job, del Valle has pretty much stayed away from city politics—you won't hear him criticize Daley but you won't hear him cheerleading either.

Instead, he's focused on modernizing the clerk's office, and especially the division of it responsible for charting the work of the City Council. He says most of the staff was still using typewriters when he first arrived, and few council records were available electronically; now the Web site includes all the council journals from 1981 onward, roll call votes for each meeting, and, as of Monday, the video archives.

Still, as del Valle acknowledges, it's difficult to navigate, even for people like me and him, who do it professionally. The council journals are in enormous PDFs that are brutal to search when they don't freeze up your computer; the vote totals don't include committee meetings where most of the (admittedly modest) debate takes place; and the video clips are of the entire hours-long council meetings, so anyone who wants to see how his alderman voted on the last resolution honoring a school spelling bee champ will have to fast-forward and rewind until coming upon the right spot.

It's still easier for Chicagoans to find out what's going on with the councils in [LA](#) and [Milwaukee](#) than with their own.

"When I arrived here we looked at what other cities were doing and found that we are way behind," del Valle said Monday.

But the clerk emphasized that more improvements are on the way. He said by early fall the Web site should include a new document management system that will enable users to search for particular pieces of legislation, their sponsors, and their progress—something more in line with the **user-friendly system** in place for the state legislature. Eventually, he said, there will be links from this information to video clips showing how aldermen deliberated and voted on it.

The reform advocates offered amens to that, but Shaw urged the clerk to do still more. He noted that a huge swath of Chicago doesn't even have access to the Internet and argued that there's no excuse for not televising council meetings. "Let me say this to Miguel del Valle, the mayor of Chicago, and the City Council: put these meetings on your cable stations! We pay for those stations with our tax dollars. It is government behind closed doors and in the dark when you refuse to do that."

Del Valle said the City Council could accomplish with a simple order, though of course that doesn't mean it will happen.

"I agree with you, Andy," del Valle said. "Keep challenging us, keep challenging the city to do more, because you can never have too much information about your government."

In a town where elected officials have said **they don't want to "overwhelm" voters** by sharing too many details of their work, that's practically a call to arms.