Encouraging the yahoo: Online citizen participation and incivility in shrinking and right-sizing cities

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**Abstract**

Citizen participation is a crucial aspect of the bottom-up perspective of public administration. One con to citizen participation is the lack of time to commit to meetings. The internet is considered one means to overcome this through blogs or other social media formats. Unfortunately, the internet allows unrestricted comments that either do not contribute to the discussion or worse disrupts it through uncivil discourse meant to upset other people i.e. flaming. In cities that are shrinking i.e. losing population the disenfranchisement is already high so this type of discourse could worsen it. In shrinking cities that are right-sizing citizen participation is emphasized in the right-sizing process. This is a study of those cities that are both shrinking (losing population) and right-sizing. Those cities were surveyed on the use of social media as well as the incidence of uncivil discourse. In addition, one newspaper in a prominent shrinking and right-sizing city, Detroit, was scanned for four weeks in February 2014 for reader comments on local stories related to the municipal government for off-topic and repugnant comments.

*Keywords*: Civility, Online, Citizen participation, Shrinking cities, Right-sizing paradigm

**Introduction**

Citizen participation is stressed in most conceptions of public administration today. The increased democratization of the functions of government such as in planning and budgeting has had many positive results. One positive result has been the identification of unforeseen concerns in which the administration learns about their community better which produces more effective decision-makers who make better decisions. Another positive result is increased public support and the legitimacy of government for the initiatives passed in which citizens become more sympathetic to tough decisions and more cooperative in the implementation of policy. Citizen participation also exposes community conflicts and through consensus builds a less divisive populace. In addition, citizen participation also educates the citizenry as well as foster positive citizen values and increase accountability (Yang & Pandey, 2011; Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Kingsley, 1997).

There are also some cons with citizen participation in government. First it increases expenses on the city and the individual. Most of these expenses are borne by the city through increases in staff, equipment and material needed while the largest expense to the individual is opportunity cost such as hours at work foregone to attend a city meeting. Second there are some communities that are simply not participative due to local culture while some communities have groups that are overly represented at meetings denigrating the representativeness of the proceedings and decisions. In addition, increased citizen participation could increase conflict and create more distrust especially if the government does not respond to the requests of the citizens (Yang & Pandey, 2011; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

E-participation is one method to overcome the costs of participation. Ahn (2011) and Halachmi and Holzer (2010) noted that it could be cost efficient. Beyond the website and minimal staff present to maintain it there are no other costs related to this form of participation. The dialogues on the online forums are for the elected leaders to peruse to develop policy. E-participation also reduces opportunity costs for prospective participants since they would be able to participate at their convenience. E-participation is not a panacea for all the cons related to citizen participation. There is still the problem with representativeness especially since there is a digital divide and online forums encourage uncivil exchanges which ultimately dissuade people from having reasoned dialogue.

Incivility in online discussions is usually reflected in what is termed ‘flaming’ which are attacks which typically lead to name-calling and general contempt for the opposing side. This type of dialogue increases distrust and discourages community building while creating distractions to actual problems that citizens could work together to solve in their community. It also discourages participation in government at all (Hwang, Borah, Namkoong & Veenstra, 2008; Janack, 2006; Benson, 1996). According to Daniel Shea, director at the Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College, “Americans believe in civility…and in compromise; they believe in middle-ground solutions. Those are two issues that Americans believe are not well-reflected in the media—in talk radio, television programs, the internet” (Page, April 22, 2010, p. 04a).

The biggest problems that emerge from incivility in online forums meant to encourage e-participation are the discouragement towards community building and the discouragement towards getting involved in government. There are many communities across the United States that have suffered significant decline since the Industrial Era. Many of these cities have lost population and are dealing with significant vacancy. Some of the worst of these cities include Detroit, Michigan, Youngstown, Ohio, Buffalo, New York, Flint, Michigan and Cleveland, Ohio. They have been termed ‘shrinking cities’. Some of these shrinking cities have been making dramatic efforts to reorganize to save their cities. This has involved targeted economic development to salvageable communities, administrative restructuring, land banking, wide-scale demolition and rehabilitation in sustainable neighborhoods, urban greening, consolidating residents in sustainable parts of the city and increasing citizen involvement in this process. This has been termed ‘right-sizing’ (Hollander, 2011; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2011; Hollander & Cahill, 2011; Mallack, 2011; Schilling & Logan, 2008).

One major part of ‘right-sizing’ is involving citizens in the process as well as attempting to forge a new identity through the process. If e-participation is a cost effective tool in engaging citizens for cash strapped cities such as ‘shrinking cities’ than this should be used to further this cause. The caveat is that online forums can produce all new levels of incivility not seen in traditional in-person meetings. The main research question that derives from this discussion is whether these online discussions in shrinking and right-sizing cities are mostly uninformed ‘flaming’ or reasoned discourse. A secondary, but just as important research question, asks whether some subjects cause uncivil exchanges so that in the future these subjects can be avoided. These questions are explored in this study.

**E-Participation, Incivility & The ‘Right-Sizing’ Paradigm**

The internet provides a public space that allows what appears to be a limitless public sphere of deliberative democracy in the Habermasian sense. Deliberative forums that can be facilitated online allow opinion formation and an exchange of arguments where public matters can be discussed in the most inclusive and equal manner possible. It can also be a stepping stone to more involved citizen participation such as participative governance where the citizens are actually involved in policymaking. Besides the increased input from the community, each individual participant in the e-participation process learns and develops as a community member. These online forums really create a diverse range of opinions that are more representative of the community than traditional forums such as city council meetings (Michels, 2012; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2012; Janack, 2006).

The unfortunate reality is that most online functions of government are only to provide services and inform residents about their government, not to facilitate the deliberative and participative process. Most local governments, where citizen involvement is most stressed, feel that citizen involvement should be in the traditional sense (face to face) not through online instruments. In addition, many view online participation in governance with skepticism because of the assumption that online discourse usually reduces to name-calling, ridiculous statements, un-related babble and uncivil discourse which only hurts the citizen involvement process (Aikins & Krane, 2010; Benson, 1996).

These opinions appear to be changing. In a 2012 ICMA survey to local governments although the overwhelming majority of local governments felt that the primary purpose of citizen engagement was to inform them, seventy-five percent of the respondents felt it was to consult with them while seventy percent felt that it was to involve them. In the same survey, forty percent of the respondents felt that civic discourse was polarized and rude whereas fifty-three percent felt that on the whole it was generally polite and tolerant (Vogel, Moulder, & Huggins, 2014).

At the center of the discussion is whether online discussions can be civil which would better facilitate the deliberative process which relies on people being willing to understand another person’s argument. Robin George Collingwood, who was an 19th to 20th century historian and philosopher, felt that the first virtue of all social and political institutions rested on civility. At the heart of civility was respect for others which also implies an interest in reaching agreements with others. The uncivil person was likened to the yahoo in the classic novel Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift. In the story, the yahoo was given to persistent quarrel, lack of agreement and resorted to force to settle issues over reasoned understanding (Johnson, 2008).

In essence, civility is manners, tolerance, peacefulness and a healthy respect for others. The absence of civility in online discussions has led some to call for an end to anonymous discussions online. As noted by Hlavach and Freivogel (2011), “anonymity seems to unleash the worst in some of these posters; they hide their faces behind a pseudonym while their voices shout out angrily, free of the normal bonds of civility (p. 24).” Anonymity is a protected right in the United States first recognized in Talley v. California (1960). This was confirmed in McIntyre vs. Ohio (1995) that anonymity was protected in the Bill of Rights. This reality has motivated many who allow online discussions of news articles or blogs / forums to seek a balance between unrestricted dialogue and controls on profanity and inappropriate comments. It has been found that most of the time it is only a minority of people that cause problems, but left unattended these ‘trolls’, as they are known in cyber-talk, can disrupt the online deliberative process (Reader, 2012; Rich, 2011; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Gsell, 2009) .

Some proactive bloggers have attempted to create a ‘code of conduct’ for cyber-exchanges in places such as blogs. One ‘code of conduct’ for bloggers developed online has as one of its codes the instruction that if the poster would not say that in person than do not say it at all. It has been found that when rules like this have been developed, most people have upheld them in their exchanges (Miller, 2007; Hurrell, 2005).

The problem is that although most people would uphold these codes and follow the rules of civility, the minority that engages in ‘flaming’ can disrupt the deliberative democratic process. In cities where the population is falling and there have been renewed attempts at getting the remaining population involved in the city government, online participation could either help or hurt efforts to get citizens involved. These cities that are losing population can be found in both the ‘Rust Belt’ and the ‘Sun Belt’. Some of these ‘shrinking cities’ have been engaging in what has been termed, ‘right-sizing’ (Hollander, 2011).

‘Right-sizing’ is matching available resources with the remaining population it actually serves in the city. It is better known by its strategies. There are four major strategies to ‘right-size’ a city. Most of the literature on it focuses on built environment changes such as demolition, rehabilitation in salvageable communities, urban greening of vacant lots, land banking abandoned homes and consolidating residents in salvageable parts of the city to decommission blighted areas of the city (Hill et.al., 2012; Mallack, 2012; Krohe Jr., 2011; Mallack, 2011; Beckman, 2010; LaCroix, 2010; Schilling & Logan, 2008).

The other strategies involve targeted community development in salvageable communities, administrative restructuring through sustainable public service and increased citizen involvement in the ‘right-sizing’ process (Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2011; Anderson, 2011). This last strategy is the focus of this article. Martinez-Fernandez et.al. (2012) identified the need to involve the residents in actions and government decisions on ‘right-sizing’. Hollander and Cahill (2011) also identified the need for the residents to be involved in the ‘right-sizing’ process. One of the goals of citizen involvement in ‘right-sizing’ is to build consensus, which unfortunately at the time of writing according to Schilling and Logan (2008), “no American city has effectively linked green infrastructure, land banking, and collaborative neighborhood planning to effectively right size itself (p. 454).”

At this stage most of the claims regarding ‘right-sizing’ have remained theoretical. Even the theory surrounding it is still developing amongst scholars. The first effort to create a theory was by Hollander and Nemeth (2011) who created five fundamental propositions for what they term a ‘smart decline theory’. The first four propositions all center on citizen participation in a deliberative way. The first proposition is that the process should be inclusive and recognize multiple voices. The second proposition is that it should be deliberative in an effort to reach consensus. The third proposition is that the deliberative process should be inclusive to the point that differential communication techniques are considered with proper information that allows the citizens to recognize and challenge power imbalances surrounding ‘right-sizing’. Lastly, the fourth proposition is that different sources of information should be used in the process which includes data from community members such as experiences, perceptions and observations.

The emphasis in ‘smart decline theory’ on the deliberative process encourages a more fruitful discussion of the use of e-participation in these cities. As noted earlier, e-participation is more cost effective and even more cost efficient at facilitating public discourse. Shrinking cities are usually fiscally distressed which requires that any facilitation of public discourse would need to be done as cheaply as possible. The digital divide and incivility pose real problems for the implementation of this method in these cities. The problem of incivility is addressed in this article.

**Study Design**

There are fifty-four cities across the United States which can be identified as both shrinking (losing population) and ‘right-sizing’. The Shrinking Cities International Research Network defines a shrinking city as an, “urban area with a minimum population of 10,000 residents that has faced population losses in larger parts for more than two years and is undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of a structural crisis (Hollander and Nemeth, 2011, 352).” Those cities with a population of 10,000 or more that had an average negative population change for the Census periods of 1990 to 2000 and 2000 to 2010 were included in this study. Further, in line with the shrinking cities definition, those cities experiencing an economic transformation with symptoms of a structural crisis were focused on amongst those cities losing population. This also was used to identify those cities attempting to ‘right-size’. These cities were identified through the ‘right-sizing’ literature, existence of a land bank in the city and/or their inclusion in a U.S. Conference of Mayors report on vacant and abandoned properties (J. Schilling, personal communication, February 5, 2012; Alexander 2011; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2009; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2008; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2006).

The public information officer, information technology professional and/or the city administration in each of these cities were contacted via email or telephone to ask a series of questions about the use of social media in their city and some of the issues with online discourse the city may have had in the past. The first question simply asked if the city allows residents to discuss municipal issues in an online format such as a blog. The second question referred to whether these online discussions, if they have them, are mediated by a city employee. The third question was regarding the anonymity of the commenter. The fourth question asked about the incidence of ‘flaming’ in these online forums. Lastly, the fifth question asked about which topics create the most controversy in the community which may lead to uncivil discourse.

In addition, the most prominent shrinking and ‘right-sizing’ city, Detroit, Michigan, was focused on in more detail. This city does not facilitate online discussions, but it has a newspaper that does allow online comments to be posted. Stories on city initiatives and city government were followed in Detroit over four weeks in the month of February 2014 and the comments section was monitored for uncivil discourse such as ‘flaming’. The types of comments as well as the type of story that generated those types of comments were noted.

This study sought to know whether these online forums whether hosted by the city or the local newspaper are mostly uninformed ‘flaming’ or reasoned discourse which would be ideal for the democratic deliberation needed to effectively involve citizens in their government. It also sought to know whether there are certain topics that create more uncivil discourse amongst participants than others in these online forums. In the future, these topics might be best handled in traditional face-to-face meetings than online discussions.

**City Interview Responses**

Only 11 cities responded to a request for an interview amongst the fifty-four cities contacted that could be identified as both shrinking (losing population) and ‘right-sizing’. The responding cities were Albany, New York; Arkansas City, Kansas; Bay City, Michigan; Buffalo, New York; Detroit, Michigan; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Huntington, West Virginia; Lakewood, Washington; Norfolk, Virginia; Southfield, Michigan and Southgate, Michigan. If the city had a public information officer, information technology department and/or public relations department these were contacted first while the city administration was contacted second. Sometimes these offices recommended another contact not affiliated with these departments who was then contacted for the interview. Some of the cities that did respond to the request for an interview were much more enthusiastic than the others in responding to the questions. It is assumed that these responders were pursuing the use of social media more enthusiastically in their city than those that responded unenthusiastically or did not respond at all. It was clear from the interviews that there were clear paths for citizen involvement through social media that were steeped in deliberation for the sake of deliberation with no policy impact from those forums.

Of the cities that responded only two responded that the city did not use social media for discussion of municipal issues which was Buffalo and Detroit. This is interesting since amongst those cities that responded these two cities are more closely aligned with the ‘right-sizing’ conception of government and they are also losing the most population. From 1990 to 2010 Buffalo lost an average of 10.76% and Detroit lost 16.21% of their residents per Census period. The other responding cities did not even come close to these figures. The City of Youngstown, the other important shrinking and ‘right-sizing’ city, did not respond to a request for an interview, but based on an observation of the city’s website it does not appear that the city is utilizing any form of social media. The website is rather basic and hard to maneuver.

Most of the cities that responded indicated that the extent of their social media use for deliberative discussion on municipal issues involved the use of Twitter and/or Facebook. Facebook was the most popular tool used by the responding cities. Some of the cities such as Southgate, Michigan and Grand Rapids, Michigan only use Facebook for one-way communication with residents such as posting events or clarifying information / posting concerns. Some of the responding cities also used other social media tools such as Linkd, Instagram, YouTube and online portals to send concerns to the city administration such as pothole repair. Albany, New York even developed an app through a private contractor called SeeClickFix which allows residents to report potholes in the street for the city to repair. Albany also experimented with a city-run blog for eight months, but then abandoned it. One of the cities, Bay City, Michigan, links onto Mlive which is an online reader blog in Michigan linked to news stories reported by the local media.

Almost all of the cities monitor the posts on their social media sites for the use of offensive language. Arkansas City, Kansas is the only city of those that responded that does not delete any posts. The typical response to the posting of offensive comments is deletion although some cities have banned some people after the posting of offensive and negative language. Most of the interviewed cities felt that this was not a frequent occurrence. Two of the responding cities, Norfolk, Virginia and Southfield, Michigan, noted that they had terms of use policies that clearly outline what is forbidden in their forums including no personal attacks, profanity, name-calling, false information, discrimination, spam, disruptive and off-topic comments and no illegal solicitations. Lakewood, Washington which has just started using Facebook and Twitter added that they felt that the users are doing a good job policing the forum for these types of comments.

Although the responding cities felt that they have responded adequately to these types of comments they felt that these things were occurring and would continue to occur. They were much more optimistic about resident comments since a majority of the commenters obeyed the terms of use policy and did not engage in ‘flaming’. The City of Albany noted that once the Mayor’s life was threatened online, but they have only had about 4 incidents in the past three years of being involved in social media. The City of Arkansas City, Kansas added that they do not allow anonymous comments which they felt helped to keep comments civil. Some cities such as Southfield, Michigan deliberately avoid controversial topics in their online site to avoid these types of discussions. Most cities felt that most of the posters were regulars and usually pessimistic towards the city and its leaders. One of the cities told the story of one of these regulars who constantly insulted the city’s leaders and its administration on the online forum. One day this person was in an altercation at a convenience store and was murdered. The official seemed very happy about this. Bay City, Michigan which uses the online reader posts from Mlive felt that the comments on that site were mostly mean including name-calling and the inciting of fights.

Overwhelmingly amongst the cities that responded felt that the topic that incited the most negative comments towards the city was the issue of taxes and fees. The second most important topic that incited negative comments was service provision including trash service, public safety issues and capital investments and infrastructure developments such as road issues including potholes, construction and red light cameras. Some cities also shared other topics that incited the most negative comments. Albany and Huntington both added that some of the comments reflect concerns over transparency and corruption in the city. The City of Grand Rapids, Michigan also received negative comments on immigration issues and expenditures by the city for these residents including investments in English as a Second Language classes and multi-lingua resources. Lakewood, Washington has a unique issue now with the legalization of marijuana and the sale of it in some neighborhoods which has been a lightning rod for anger over this issue. Norfolk, Virginia also had many in the online forums complaining about racism in the city and police actions.

**Case Study: City of Detroit / Detroit Free Press Reader Comments**

The City of Detroit has been struggling with population decline for a long time. Between 2000 and 2010 the city lost 25% of its population which was one of the worse population decline figures in the United States in that period which could only be rivaled by Gary, Indiana which lost 22% of its population in that period (Keen, 2011). In July 2011 the city began implementing its Detroit Works Project which was its preeminent effort to ‘right-size’ the city. The plan was focused initially on three neighborhoods in the city and was planning on incorporating more citizen engagement after the first six months of the initiative (Kaffer, 2010). The city did not make much progress in the plan due to the atrocious budget deficits which led to the imposition of an emergency manager and the filing of Chapter 9 bankruptcy in July 2013.

The Detroit Future City Plan became the next plan which debuted in January 2013. This plan was just an extension of the Detroit Works Project which also called for the urban greening of vacant land, rezoning of the city, urban farming and reforestation, and the offering of incentives for residents to move to healthier parts of the city as well as concentrating development in these areas. The emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, as well as the newly elected mayor, Mike Duggan, also are promoting this plan in which the plan of adjustment to deal with Detroit’s 18 billion dollar debt problem includes 520.3 million dollars for blight removal over the next six fiscal years. Along with other blight removal efforts, some funded by the state and federal governments and some managed by private and non-profit groups, a substantial amount of blight removal is planned in the coming years. There are also efforts to rationalize the blight removal through a mapping project that is funded by federal dollars and managed by private and non-profit organizations. Their mapping project with policy recommendations is expected to be finished by March 2014 (Gallagher, 2014a; Gallagher, 2014b).

Despite the bankruptcy the city is still focused on ‘right-sizing’ the administration through the efficient provision of services. Much of this is through out-sourcing services such as water and sewer and garbage. It is also working on changing employment contracts in exchange for the support of a rescue fund that will lessen cuts to pensions and it has shed some management responsibilities of its parks, such as Belle Island, to the State of Michigan. The Detroit Institute of Arts in all likelihood will be managed as a private foundation without city financial support. This ‘right-sizing’ is in addition to the built-environment ‘right-sizing’ of blight removal, urban greening and targeted development. If all goes as planned, Detroit may be the first city in America that has successfully ‘right-sized’ itself (Meyer, 2014; Guillen, 2014a; Stryker, 2014; Tompor & Guillen, 2014).

The only aspect of ‘right-sizing’ that is not apparent from the plan of adjustment or the Detroit Future City Plan is whether the citizens will be actively involved in this process. According to one commenter, “Although under a different name, many residents and business owners participated in the Detroit Works Project meetings which had to be discontinued due to that group's inability to deliver a similar message to those most affected” (Gallagher, 2014a). These meetings were face-to-face focus groups. The online forum has not been explored as a method to engage citizens in the ‘right-sizing’ of Detroit and with the plan of adjustment also including more than 100 million dollars in technology upgrades in the city the time may be right to recommend this method of citizen engagement. This is especially pertinent since the emergency manager finishes his appointment in September 2014 while the city has recently hired a new Chief Information Officer who is a nationally recognized information technology expert (Helms, 2014).

The local newspaper in Detroit, Detroit Free Press, allows readers to post comments under stories reported in its online edition. The posts are linked to Facebook so a Facebook account is needed to contribute to the forum. Although the posters could use pseudonyms it appears that most contributors use their real names from their actual Facebook accounts. Stories that were reported in February 2014 were followed along with the comments to those stories. The stories were only those that focused on events that affect the city government excluding crime stories such as murders. Of particular interest were stories that surrounded the function of city government which is the focus of this paper since citizen involvement in city government would involve these functions.

As noted in the city interviews, most comments to these stories were civil, but there were some stories that gathered more uncivil comments than others. The story that gathered the most uncivil comments involved a water deal between the City of Detroit’s Water and Sewer Department and one of its suburban counties, Oakland County. Brooks Patterson, who manages the county as the county executive, is threatening to have Oakland County create its own water system because of the perceived ineptitude of Detroit’s water system which has an aging infrastructure (Bomey, Gallagher & Wisely, 2014).

The topic that caused the most uncivil responses in the Detroit water deal involved a battle between the suburbs and the city. After a barrage of comments from people in the suburbs criticizing Detroit, one Detroit resident responded, “What you meant to say was that you want to keep getting water at today's rates even after SOMEBODY ELSE pays the hundreds of millions to modernize the system” (Kaffer, 2014). At some point this commenter called Patterson a racist which led to other claims of racism on behalf of those in the suburbs. One responded to the racism diatribes by saying, “yeah- your kind of resentful rhetoric is a huge improvement over all the racist Detroit bashers, thanks for elevating the conversation and for doing your bit to bring people together. This is my lame attempt at sarcasm BTW” (Kaffer, 2014a).

The next news topic that gathered the most uncivil responses involved a hockey arena deal in which the city intends to sell 39 parcels in a blighted area of Detroit to the owner of the Detroit Red Wings for 1 dollar while other owners of private land in the area were selling their land for millions. In addition, the owner will lease the land for 95 years at no cost to him while helping to pay off bonds used to build the stadium. A community organization wanted to have community benefits built into the plan, but this was not added to the deal. It also has been reported that the owner is delinquent on his city property taxes while some of his properties are blighted and had to be demolished on with city money (Guillen & Reindl, 2014).

One commenter became enraged that people did not agree with the plan to sell city properties for 1 dollar as well as not guaranteeing community benefits for the arena development. He stated, “NICE meaningless rant !! Go create a couple thousand jobs and move them DT and then we'll talk ok - until then . . . . STFU” (Guillen & Reindl, 2014). This commenter than went on to praise the owner by outlining his biography from start to finish and describing him as a true American hero, not like President Barack Obama who has done nothing for the country. The same commenter also called other people names, even saying to another commenter, “You just might be the most ASININE person on the planet” (Guillen & Reindl, 2014). Another commenter also called this person an idiot which prompted another commenter to say, “I bet you wouldn't say that to Georges face” (Guillen & Reindl, 2014) Another commenter tried to intervene and said, “Look everybody just calm down. Both sides are right in this argument” (Guillen & Reindl, 2014). At some point another commenter also criticized the plan which led to an online shouting match with them telling each other to shut up (Kaffer, 2014b).

The third story topic that encouraged the most uncivil comments involved the Detroit bankruptcy plan. The plan outlined cuts up to 34% for city retirees with 10% cuts for police and fire without cost of living adjustments. The planned cuts could be reduced if the different parties agree to the conditions in a rescue fund for pensions over a 20 year period that is being built by state money, Detroit Institute of Art funding, and private / foundation donations. There is hope that this can be agreed upon as well as the adjustment plan because the legal fees are costing the city millions. An agreement to the plan requires 170,000 creditors to vote on the restructuring plan that will shed 80% of Detroit’s debt. Creditors representing 2/3 of the city’s debt have to agree to the plan and / or represent half the number of claimants. Once this plan is approved Orr does not expect any meaningful recovery for the city until 2020 while the city focuses on cost control and improving city services and the while it is ‘right-sizing’ i.e. removing blight and greening (Tompor & Guillen, 2014; Priddle, 2014; Priddle & Snavely, 2014; Walsh, 2014).

Some of the comments in these stories involved pensioners in the city government complaining about their pensions being cut while those around the state also complained about the contributions of the State towards the pension rescue fund. Some commented that pensions are too high with the retirement age being too early which prompted one pensioner to say, “Where in hell do you figure police officers pension is 34,000.00 a year. Your head is up your a##” (Helms, 2014).

One commenter on the subject of the bankruptcy continuously harped on the selling of artwork covenants instead of the artworks in the Detroit Institute of Art to help pay for the pension obligations. He repeated his comments several times in several stories with chants like, “Put artworks to work, not pensioners” (Egan & Gray, 2014). People eventually became tired with this person and began attacking him. One said, “Take the hint. You are not welcome here” (Egan & Gray, 2014). Another said, “Get lost clear for you” (Egan & Gray, 2014)? Then it became apparent that they knew each other and they started accusing each other of corruption in Detroit. One said, “You are just trying to make a buck for yourself off the carcass of Detroit” (Egan & Gray, 2014). Eventually they began calling each other stupid and the comments ended.

Some commenters obviously were living outside the city even outside the state. This irked many in the comment board especially if their opinion offended them. One commenter quibbled towards one of these commenters, “You're a really obnoxious MF. Don't you have better things to do in Albuquerque where you live? You post a lot of dumb stuff. The Koch brothers must be paying you on a piece work basis. Have you given any thought to therapy” (Priddle, 2014)?

When some of these commenters called other people names the users would call them out. They would either call him/her a troll or ask that the person be more polite in their disagreement. One stated, “If you disagree with him, cool. However, you shouldn't disrespect him with the name calling. You're creating a hostile online environment” (Priddle & Snavely, 2014). These comments helped to quell the name-calling.

The forth story topic that encouraged uncivil comments was a story on the privatizing of trash collection in the city. This was part of the emergency manager’s plan which was approved by the city council. The deal will not save the city money, but it will increase trash pickup particularly for recyclables and bulk trash pickup. It will result in some city workers losing their jobs though (Guillen, 2014b).

There developed two camps in the reader comments in which one camp supported keeping trash collection under the administration of the city while the other supported the privatization effort. The same dichotomies described previously emerged in this issue with the people in the suburbs criticizing people in Detroit and the people in Detroit responding to those critiques. One critique of the privatizing noted that trash pickup was not a problem before so he did not understand the privatization especially since it would not save the city money and would cost some city jobs. A commenter responded, “It doesn’t matter what positive things are written about, you can guarantee he will hate it and complain. I can’t imagine spending my life being such a jackturd, being negative, infuriating people just to do it, all thinking he is going to get more people to like him/vote for him” (Guillen, 2014).

The fifth story topic that caused uncivil exchanges involved a petroleum plant that wants to expand into an adjoining neighborhood. The plant is offering residents money for their properties above the value of their homes and they are also offering renters money to help them move. Some residents want to remain in their homes and are not accepting the offer (Carlisle, 2014).

One commenter did not understand why the residents would not accept the money and move and actually seemed to be angry that they are not accepting the money. One commenter responded harshly, “Let’s put it in your yard then, dipshit” (Carlisle, 2014)! He was then criticized for his harsh comments by several commenters. One commenter told him to burn his car since the gas for it came from plants like the one that seeks to expand in the story. He responded, “Mike is a typical conservative ignoramus. He believes there are only 2 options; polluting the environment, or destroying your car” (Carlisle, 2014). This person continued to call his opponents names which caused one commenter to respond, “Why are the liberal responses laced with name calling? Why would anyone buy a house in the shadow of a refinery? What were you expecting” (Carlisle, 2014)?

The sixth story topic that caused a particularly interesting uncivil exchange involved race. The story itself was focused on the efforts of the city to remove blight in the plan of adjustment proposed by emergency manager Kevyn Orr (Gallagher, Montemurri & Reindl, 2014). Somehow the discussion got off topic to talking about forced integration of schools by a person who self professes being a tea party patriot. She goes on to explain how people migrated to the suburbs because of the riots in Detroit and how those people were the builders and the people who remained were the ruiners i.e. the African Americans. When she was accused of being racist she responded that the real racists were in Detroit (Gallagher, Montemurri & Reindl, 2014).

The race issue kept surfacing in most of the posts in most of the stories. One story on the Wright Museum which is struggling for funding especially since the city’s funding will be cut is a good example. The museum is a museum on African American history. A writer for the Detroit Free Press wrote a commentary on the need to save the Wright (Riley, 2014). The comments were focused on race, of course. Although the racism was relatively in control one comment was particularly stinging when this commenter said, “Crickets. Ask all your white friends to help, Rochelle “(Riley, 2014). Rochelle is the first name of the writer who is an African American.

Although some of these stories caused many uncivil comments, most people had informed and respectful things to say. Some people became discouraged with the negative comments in which they stopped participating in the discussion which is the main concern with uncivil comments. One commenter said, “I'm going to follow my wife's lead and stop reading the comment thread on anything remotely political. No desire to find solutions, just a contest to see who can shout loudest and embarrass fellow citizens most. We don't have to get along, but we must be willing to work together” (Kaffer, 2014b). Another commenter was just flattened by the negativity in the comments and said, “I 'm at a loss in comprehending the lack of empathy and outright hatred in many of these comments. I feel for these people and would hope that the general tenor here reflects the tendency of negativity to reign by posters as opposed to concern for others” (Riley, 2014b).

It was also apparent in the postings that people were not interested in deliberating over issues, but were only interested in a place to voice their opinions. This type of participation is not deliberative and is not really beneficial to the participants although it would be informative for the policymakers. One commenter said, “Some conservative trolls on here constantly write the same boring slogans and catchphrases repeatedly no matter what the topic is about” (Walsh & Gallagher, 2014). These slogans were everywhere as well as non-related posts and posts that were advertising different things not related to the story.

**Discussion**

As discussed previously there are many positive and negative aspects of citizen participation in government. Administrators can learn about their community, support can be gained for public projects and citizens can be educated about the functions of their local government. Increased citizen participation can also cause more conflict, increase the costs for decision-making in the city, and increase distrust amongst discouraged participants who did not see the results of their participation. The internet provides one tool to encourage citizen participation, but if not managed correctly can actually hurt efforts to get more citizens involved in the management of their city.

This study sought to discover if online deliberative exchanges on city issues were civil or not and whether certain topics cause this incivility more so than other topics. The results from the interviews and the case study of Detroit are that most of the comments are civil. It was amazing to note how informed many of the participants were in the forums on Detroit news stories especially surrounding the topic of the bankruptcy. This is encouraging for the use of this tool in facilitating more citizen participation in the city government.

Although civility was maintained, it was apparent in the case study of Detroit that posters were not really reading each other posts but posting their comments and then leaving the forum. This would still make the tool incredibly informative for city policy makers, but it would not facilitate the deliberative process between residents allowing a consensus to evolve. A consensus is needed to develop a unified and generally accepted decision on behalf of the policymaker.

In addition, the commenters were generally negatively. It was rare to see positive comments about city initiatives which could be the result of people posting only when they are angry about something. An example of one poster becoming upset about all the negativity involved Detroit’s plan to build a rail line in downtown Detroit called the M1. The project will have 11 stops and stretch over 3.3 miles and is expected to be only the beginning of an expanded service beyond the downtown. There were many negative comments about the project including its cost which is being funded through public and private money including a large chunk from the Federal government and whether the project would be sustainable or require subsidies to keep it operational. One commenter grew tired with the negative comments and said, “The transit system will be in Detroit waiting for you to hop on board. But this them (Detroiter's) vs. Us (suburbanites) garbage needs to stop. You do realize that Detroit is a laughing stock of the country. That includes its suburbs. And this mentality you exhibit is a big reason why. Geeze… So many Debbie Downers in the region" (Guillen, 2014c).

The problem with a lack of deliberation and diverse viewpoints on issues (positive and negative) could be overcome if the online forum is deliberate in its purpose and targeted in that people in the community are encouraged to join the forum instead of allowing a laissez-faire system of open posting like that in reader posts to news stories. There is no purpose to those posts except to share ones opinion anyways so it should be no surprise that this is what people do alone. The quality of the comments could also be increased if there were guarantees that public officials would use those comments / deliberations to help form policy.

As noted in the ICMA study on public participation, the outcome from citizen participation can be optimized if city leaders consider the readiness and capacity of their city to host these forums while considering their reasons for involving the citizens in these issues in the first place. In addition, the report adds that city leaders need goals and a defined role for the public in this process which needs to be clearly communicated to the citizens who are willing to participate in these forums so there is no ambiguity in the process. The authors add, “Through careful design and monitoring of online forums, localities can significantly improve the effectiveness of public participation by expanding the number of people participating, restoring the civility of their participation, and ensuring clarity about the role of the public in final decision-making” (Vogel, Moulder & Huggins, 2014).

The topics that incited the most uncivil comments overwhelmingly surrounded the issue of public expenditures and taxes. In the Detroit case study the uncivil comments surrounding water services were the most frequent. Most of those concerns surrounded costs and quality of service. Services such as trash pick up were cited in both the case study and the interviews as causing a lot of incivility. Construction was noted by the interviewees, but was not one of the topics in the February stories in Detroit although construction projects such as the Red Wings hockey arena and the M1 rail line caused uncivil comments not necessarily focused on the inconveniences of the construction itself. The bankruptcy topic was the most frequent story topic in the Detroit Free Press in February and it was not a surprise that the plan of adjustment submitted in February caused a lot of controversy and anger which led to online incivility.

Although some of these topics were lightning rods for uncivil comments, these uncivil comments still represented a small percentage of the comments in the reader posts. It was also apparent that those who were making these uncivil comments tended to be the same people which were verified by the cities in the interviews. It may be that certain individuals do not have the online social skills to handle a discussion on a hot topic and it would be the role of the moderator to warn these individuals and eventually ban them if they do not follow the online codes of conduct which should be clearly stated as some cities have done across the country.

Although some hot topics did encourage more uncivil comments the online forum for discussion on these topics if effectively moderated should continue to be effective in getting citizens involved in their government. The question is whether online participants will reflect the diversity of the city and if this lack of diversity is due to the digital divide. If this is the case, traditional face-to-face council meetings should continue while online forums should run in tandem with these meetings. The ultimate result should be a more informed administration and citizenry with policy decisions that reflect the diversity of views that reached a consensus on the needed directions in their community.

**Conclusions**

This study explores in a qualitative fashion the incidence of uncivil comments in online forums in shrinking and right-sizing cities through interviews and a case study on the City of Detroit. Based on the interviews and the case study it appears the uncivil discourse is relatively limited in these online forums which is encouraging for the use of this tool to increase citizen participation in shrinking and ‘right-sizing’ cities. There are a host of issues that were not addressed in this paper such as the diversity of participants including the digital divide, the effectiveness of translating these comments / deliberations into policy action and the sentiments of participants after participating in the forums. These are questions that need to be explored in future papers.

An online ethic is developing that has increased awareness of the impact that words in cyber-space have on people and institutions. Participants are self-policing these forums and many of them are being effectively controlled to limit these comments. These positive directions make the tool all that more appealing for shrinking and ‘right-sizing’ cities especially given their cost savings aspect in comparison to focus groups. A positive online experience with city administration and with others might translate into the feeling of ownership on behalf of the participant which would be a beneficial result of the forums especially as many of these shrinking and ‘right-sizing’ cities are struggling to re-invent themselves. This re-invention needs active citizens who actually care about the future of the city.

Although this study is limited in the number of cities interviewed and the singular case of Detroit during a specific time period and using an online newspaper forum instead of a city-led effort, the results across this pool were so similar that it would be surprising if more cities were interviewed and more cases included would deliver different results. The only concern is that with these cities it is not known if they have the technological capacity to implement an online forum, but as pointed out in the plan of adjustment submitted by the emergency manager in Detroit, technology is a critical aspect of city administration today (Helms, 2014). These cities will need to invest in it and hire people who are competent in managing it or they will continue to lag other cities.

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