

10-13-2016

Equity and Inclusion in Online Community Forums: An Interview with Steven Clift

Carolyne Abdullah

Everyday Democracy, cabdullah@everyday-democracy.org

Christopher F. Karpowitz

Brigham Young University, chris_karpowitz@byu.edu

Chad Raphael

Santa Clara University, craphael@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

 Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Public Affairs Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Abdullah, Carolyne; Karpowitz, Christopher F.; and Raphael, Chad (2016) "Equity and Inclusion in Online Community Forums: An Interview with Steven Clift," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol12/iss2/art11>

Equity and Inclusion in Online Community Forums: An Interview with Steven Clift

Abstract

Online forums pose unique challenges and opportunities for creating equitable public discussions. In this interview, Steven Clift, Executive Director and Founder of E-Democracy.org, shares lessons learned about how to attract new immigrants and refugees to place-based online communities, seeding and facilitating discussions among ethnically diverse residents, and fostering civil discourse. He emphasizes that building a thriving and diverse neighborhood forum online depends on providing spaces where people can discuss community life, exchange free goods, and talk about civic issues in ways that arise organically from people's everyday concerns, rather than recruiting people to a primarily political forum, which tends to attract privileged residents whose voices often dominate in offline politics. Clift also reflects on the implications for equity of the changing technological landscape for online deliberations, from the rise of Yahoo! Groups to Facebook Groups to commercial neighborhood sites, such as Nextdoor.com. As the Internet becomes integrated into all aspects of everyday life, Clift's insights can help us to envision how inclusive online forums can be incorporated into many kinds of public engagement.

Keywords

Internet, online, deliberation, community, inclusion, equity

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Hayden Galloway and Jenah House for transcribing this interview.

In the early days of the Internet, some observers feared that the medium would replace the thick ties people experience in geographically-defined communities with the thin ties of dispersed communities based on shared interests (e.g., Doheny-Farina, 1996). In response, pioneers like Steven Clift created online place-based community forums, which became valuable arenas for informing residents, gathering their opinions, inspiring volunteerism to address common issues and problems, and recruiting participants for short-term projects and long-term public engagement (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, pp. 273-4). Initially, equitable participation in online forums was hampered by differences in Internet access. While these digital divides are by no means a thing of the past, the more enduring challenge may be inequitable access to the public sphere based on longstanding exclusions, especially of low-income people, women, people of color, and immigrants.

In this interview, Clift, the Executive Director and Founder of E-Democracy.org (www.e-democracy.org), discusses how technological and socio-political inequities intertwine and can be overcome by thoughtful designers of online deliberation. Clift has spent more than two decades creating and reflecting on the uses of social media for citizen engagement, public participation, e-government, and institutional transparency. He has spoken and consulted on online engagement and e-democracy in over 35 countries, and has been honored as a White House Champion of Change for Open Government.

In particular, Clift draws on his experience creating online neighborhood forums in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 2010, E-Democracy launched its BeNeighbors.org forums (www.beneighbors.org), which have built a sense of place-based community both on the Internet and face-to-face among over 15,000 residents participating in more than 35 neighborhood forums, reaching 30 percent of households in some areas. Clift explains how BeNeighbors.org has employed innovative techniques for inclusive recruiting and facilitation of participants in online discussion, the relationship between safe spaces for immigrant communities and cross-cutting forums in which more diverse neighbors communicate, and trade-offs between treating participants equally and equitably. BeNeighbors.org builds upon and contributes to the growing body of experiments with online neighborhood networks around the world and efforts to make them inclusive, public, civil, and vibrant sites of community discussion (see, e.g., Davies & Gangadharan, 2009; Coleman & Shane, 2011).

Evolution of Neighborhood Forums

Abdullah, Karpowitz, and Raphael (AKR): How has neighborhood networking evolved over the past five years?

Clift: Initially, neighborhood forums were kind of like a natural monopoly: people gravitated to whatever one worked well, whether it was a Yahoo! Group or a web forum. And now, notably, you see multiple online spaces serving the same neighborhood on different platforms that are actually working, which is new. Today, most people who run neighborhood online forums are doing it on Facebook or on a Yahoo! Group. They're doing it as individuals just for their neighborhood. They have day jobs. At E-Democracy, we have created roughly 40 neighborhood forums, and we see that some work really well, some hardly open, and some are in the middle.

Our forums have always been public by our design—open, inclusive, and run according to democratic values – and that's different from some of the newer commercial online spaces. In St. Paul, we created our neighborhood forums two or three years later than we did in Minneapolis, when there was no competition. Facebook's group technology didn't work well at all and Nextdoor didn't exist – back then. But later Nextdoor in particular came in with their private social networks and said, "Give us your credit card, prove who you are," and "The government can't see what you have to say on our network" (as if it is a good thing for the government not to see the voice of the people or that people are always upset with government). In St. Paul, we have lost a lot of folks to this "gated community" model. With Facebook Groups, people really like the more visual site with a base among people most like themselves who they trust and there's a generational appeal to younger people. When we did outreach, Latino leaders would say to me, "Steven, Latinos love Facebook, you know? We don't want to learn some other website."

That said, E-Democracy's many active neighborhood forums remain one of the only vibrant islands of non-profit community-based local online engagement in the world. We joke that Facebook is the Walmart, Nextdoor is the Target, and we are the farmer's market for neighbors online.

Recruiting for Inclusion

AKR: What does your experience reveal about how to do inclusive recruiting for online neighborhood forums?

Clift: Our focus with inclusive online community forums, particularly at the neighborhood level, is sort of a hybrid between a community engagement project and a participatory democracy effort. We go first at community life and we have democratic strings attached.

With our ongoing citywide online town halls (which started in 1998) created with a political frame, those who usually show up are the more politically active citizens. If you say, “Hey, come have your say! It’s an online town hall on city politics!” you get one percent of households that show up for that versus 20, 30, 40 percent for a broader community frame with neighborly exchange. Unless you can connect it to a broader information engagement sphere, politics as a frame is by its nature fundamentally exclusive because it’s going to cause people to opt out at a tremendously high rate.

A different approach emerged from these neighborhood-by-neighborhood online groups, on Yahoo! and various websites. They predated Facebook Groups and sites like Nextdoor, and we saw a much broader cross-section of the population attracted to these neighborhood spaces about community life. People were recommending plumbers, having discussions about crime—very local kinds of exchanges— and exchanging free stuff (like on Freecycle). We said, “Well, it’s great that these sites attract a broader cross-section of the population, but could we also make them even more inclusive? Could we connect all neighbors and have these types of spaces emerge not just in the historic district or wealthy or creative class neighborhood, but in low-income neighborhoods? Could we do some bridge-building across race and income in spaces where that typically hasn’t existed?” That’s what motivated our first phase of BeNeighbors.org.

The most important lesson over all is “just ask.” You need to invite people from diverse communities to join the forums, often one at a time. Most tech projects are 95 percent technology, and five percent outreach, which is always an afterthought. Outreach is always someone else’s job to do, so you end up with a lot of civic apps and projects that have very few users. Or they’re geared toward transparency, and end up mainly being used by the political class to beat each other over the head with more information that they get about what their opponents have done wrong. That might be good for the checks-and-balances side of politics, but there’s very little to engage a broader cross-section of the public.

If you just build it, they won’t come. The typical pattern for local communities connecting online is that the most wired, most highly educated, most homeowner-dense areas connect the most organically or naturally, if you will. And often these are the folks that are most connected to politics as well. They may not be

connecting based on a political frame, but they're connecting when something political happens and their squeaky wheel is even louder now because they're so well-connected with each other.

People love to connect with their neighbors online. It helps them break down social isolation. We don't all take the same trolley anymore. We have air-conditioning in the summer and all these things that keep us apart, so there is this great passion for connecting. But I have been in lots of settings with very passionate democracy builders who haven't stepped back and realized that, "Oh yeah! Most of the neighbors, even though they are new to me, they are kind of most like me." And if you go with what is natural and you just build it—you create a Facebook Group for your neighborhood or now you are active on Nextdoor—you won't connect with everyone in the community unless you intentionally ask the question, "Who's not here, and how do we reach them? And *who* will reach them?"

In St. Paul, we had the resources to do inclusive outreach and to hire people from many different backgrounds who spoke different languages to try to make local communities online far more representative of the people who lived there. We used census data to figure out which areas have the highest concentration of peoples of color, and that's how we targeted our door knocking. We hired outreach teams that spoke 10 different languages and they each worked 10 to 15 hours a week over two summers, going door-to-door and asking people to join our online forums. We went to ethnic community festivals and we signed people up. We had a mix of people. So if we had someone that spoke Spanish and someone that spoke Hmong on the same route, depending on the household they could call each other across the street and they could say, "Hey, come over, we need your help!" And when they said, "Hey, would you like to meet your neighbors online?" they found a great diversity of responses. Low-income people were not less likely to sign up. If they did not have Internet access we had little flyers on where they could get it. (For a fuller account of E-Democracy's recruiting strategies, see E-Democracy, 2011; 2016.)

What seemed to be resonating with people might change from block to block. Because we offered community life as the lead and democracy as one of the benefits, on one block you might be talking about how the online forum is this place where you can go to find out about the new impacts of the light rail line and have your say about it. In other areas, we might lead off with, "It's a great place to talk about where you might want to send your kids to school or exchange free stuff with your neighbors."

The key is real relevancy in people's lives. This mixture of community life and free stuff with civics made the forums much more relevant to a wide range of people. It's amazing how many people have joined our forums because they lost their cat. You're trying to find your cat, and out of necessity, you join the network. Then you stay and end up having a discussion about the shade study related to the new building next to the light rail line, and there's back-and-forth between the nearest neighbors that are most upset and the people a little further away hoping for a new coffee shop in that new building. In response to crime alerts people will also talk about questions like "Do we have the resources for the police to adequately address the rash of burglaries or the violence in our community?" You will find issues about infrastructure or stoplights or traffic speeds often will then connect up into larger civic issues.

We have had hundreds of postings in a year in St. Paul and the discussions are more civic, more issue-oriented. In Minneapolis we have had lots more talk about lost pets, free stuff—those warmer, fuzzier, neighbor-connecting topics. But we have never had the resources to go door-to-door in Minneapolis to recruit participants to the forums, so while we have some economic diversity, we do not have the Latino and East African community participate at the level that I would like to see. We view this as a huge untapped opportunity to build online bridges among local immigrants and the native born. In South Minneapolis our very active independent forums are hosted on an open source platform that would allow new experiments, research, and lesson generation that could be shared with major platforms.

A very low budget experiment that we're just starting is called "St. Paul Next," which is a Facebook Group for people under 30 to raise their voices in the local community. We've recruited about 85 people on there so far through some small networking via our existing base of networks, plus geo-targeted and age-targeted Facebook advertising. The people that have signed up based on that advertising are even more ethnically diverse than the community itself at that age range. I would estimate that 80 percent of the people that signed up are young people of color.

I'm intrigued by that. The people that Facebook thinks are worth less to advertisers are low-income, young people in certain ZIP Codes, so if you're trying to do more inclusive outreach, they are one of the cheaper groups to advertise to on the Internet, so there's an opportunity to reach them at a low cost.

One problem with relying on Facebook advertising is that that's not organic growth. I could recruit a thousand people with advertising, but because they

joined rapidly but haven't interacted much with the group or each other as "Facebook friends," Facebook's algorithms will likely keep the initial engagement off those members' news feeds, until some topic becomes overwhelmingly popular. You get better distribution than Facebook Pages do, but I am on hundreds of Facebook Groups and I get shown maybe five posts from them every day.

We are considering ways to recruit group volunteers from different ethnicities for face-to-face connections and then say, "OK, here's your online community space! Let's make this happen! What do you want to do with it?" The right way to grow an authentic group involves community gathering and really defining the scope and purpose with the young people. They might even say, "Well we should just be doing this on Whatsapp, anyway. What's this Facebook thing? That's old-fashioned."

It should be noted that neighborhood forums on every platform skew 30 and older, so to build place-based online communities for younger residents will require some creative thinking, in large part because this population is so mobile and fluid at this stage of life. Like our investment in an outreach team full of immigrants and people of color for our BeNeighbors.org effort, to turn this small experiment into a full project, one needs to invest in the talent of those authentically connected to the now majority minority communities of those under 30. For example, if you want local St. Paul Ethiopian young adults, you have to hire some to help. Or if you want the Karen people from Burma in the North End of St. Paul, hire some to lead the project and the outreach. Facebook advertising might be a great way to get people into the virtual room at a low cost, but activating the online exchange so it sustainably reflects the diversity of the community under 30 will require deep buy-in and trust building across those who step forward the lead and guide the online space. Without invested participants and those empowered to react to the eventual abuse or uncivil behavior that can kill any online space without a careful facilitation, we would end up with a virtual ghost town.

Forum Design

AKR: What aspects of forum design have been most successful at engaging diverse community residents?

Clift: The core of our model is many-to-many open community spaces. The whole idea is to have a discussion about place rather than a discussion among certain people. You don't have to live there to talk about a place. You could work there.

You could be a day-time nanny or a server at a local restaurant. You could work for the neighborhood association but not live there.

Our technology was designed so anyone could publish and we only would moderate your first post to make sure you weren't a spammer. We had other rules and guidelines. First, we required real names. I once worked as an intern in Joe Biden's mailroom, when he was a Senator, and all the anonymous letters went in the trash. I've always found that your name gives you credibility, no matter what your name might be, because you were willing to stand by what you had to say. That may be intimidating to some, who might say, "Oh my gosh, someone is going to know my political opinion?" But our view is that if you said something, it should have some credibility to make it stronger.

If you knew how to post an email, that's all you would need to know to publish on our forums. When we went door-to-door or went to community festivals, we signed you up on a sheet of paper that asked for your first name, last name, email address, and had a check box for which forum you wanted to join. We created the account automatically for you. We would never require you to come to the website. The only thing you needed to know how to do to publish was to push reply. And so by having the lowest common denominator for publishing to the group we've made it a more shared space, a more equitable space.

Another key lesson here is that average citizens aren't going to waste their time just talking for the fun of it, especially in the citywide town halls. They want to *participate*, with the idea that their voice will be heard and that their voice will matter. And so having elected officials join our forums has been very important. The presence of journalists on our forums lets people know, "Hey, what I'm talking about might actually get in the paper and have an impact."

For example, there are lots of discussions in my neighborhood about the water quality of a local lake. A gentleman used the forum to recruit people to help him do lake cleanups and then he collected the trash as part of an art show and there were a couple of town hall meetings, and now they're creating a nonprofit called Friends of Lake Hiawatha. The forum was sort of the primary vehicle of this one person who was able to put a story out there about what he was doing and inspired more people to get involved. You go from just talking about issues to building community and solving local problems. And I don't know how equity in terms of race or income fits into that, but there's equity in terms of creating an open space where people can say stuff and they don't have to have their own newsletter. You don't have to have your own blog or a thousand Twitter followers or friends on Facebook.

Other people have cautioned me, “Well, if you say the government is in the forum too, maybe someone who is undocumented, or someone who comes from a culture where the police were very corrupt, might be scared away.” I think it's a caution, but we've taken an integrationist approach. Our goal is expressly to try to connect people across race and income in the same neighborhood. As a citizen, you can be part of something, and as long as you don't engage in name-calling and you're willing to use your real name, we've created a ready-made shared audience, which then creates a sense of value for many people, who say, “Well, it's worth my time.”

Facilitation Styles

AKR: Which styles of facilitation have helped you to create equal or equitable participation in your forums?

Clift: A key thing that we did technologically is we set a volume limit on postings. Initially, we didn't let you post more than two times in 24 hours. We still typically have this limit on daily postings in citywide forums because they are more political, and then in our neighborhood forums we allow three, sometimes four, because we don't get as much heated conversation there. That does two things. One, people hold back on their second post, because they only have one more shot that day. So the more political people pull back and shut their mouths a little bit. It's kind of like a talking stick. And so other people then can enter the discussion before it gets taken to its conclusion. That really increases the diversity of voices in the space. If people post a second time, they have to wait 12 hours or six hours or whatever it is until the first post has lapsed. So the second effect of that two-posts-a-day rule, combined with requiring real names, is that it significantly increases the agenda-setting power of our spaces.

We have volunteer forum managers in each area and it really varies from neighborhood to neighborhood whether our volunteer is more of a caretaker on the technology side of the moderation or a more active community animator, who also stokes the fire of dialogue when things are quiet. I think that active community management is super important. For example, in Cedar-Riverside, when we launched that forum, we had a young woman who was from Kenya originally and she had been an editor of a Pan-African newspaper and had a lot of trust, and so she worked behind the scenes to try to get people to use the forum more proactively. For the most part, if you get a thousand people in a virtual room, there are enough people there to keep going. If you have 200 people, it is

less likely you'll have enough people to have a very active exchange, and it's harder to get a thousand people now than it was five years ago.

We had our community managers encourage people to introduce themselves to break the ice in a topic area set aside for that, really paying attention to who hasn't said hello yet. You have to make sure that, if you've done the recruitment of the diverse communities, those voices then are visible early on. You can't just have 10 white middle-class men all say hello enthusiastically and then expect Somali women to jump in. You need to have a Somali woman say hello in the first five introductions. If you don't manage that round of introductions and just hope for the best, you may have just set the tone for that forum for the next five years, and you're done, if you wanted it to be a space where you would have more diverse voices. Researchers who looked at our forums found that people who introduced themselves went on to contribute more postings and participated for longer periods than those who didn't introduce themselves (Lu & Farzan, 2015).

We also created these positions in St. Paul to monitor ethnic media and look for stories that were at the intersection of ethnicity and geography. They might be about new local businesses that started up, like an ethnic restaurant, or about a new community program. If you think of the online group as a roving book club, we would pull content in from different sources. That involves labor, but if you model behavior people might follow it and contribute similar postings.

Evaluating Equality and Equity

AKR: In what ways have you tried to measure equality or equity of participation?

Clift: The key thing in terms of evaluation is to do it! In the civic technology, open-government, online participation space, there is just very little evaluation done. A lot of the .org projects have very few resources, so a lot of projects just haven't done in-depth analysis, or if they're a startup or a commercial venture, the information is proprietary, and the knowledge of what works doesn't get out into the general sphere. We felt that with our BeNeighbors initiative, it was extremely important to be very public with our evaluation of our successes and failures.

Designing the evaluation helped to sharpen our focus. Obviously, the key step is deciding what you want to evaluate. Why are we doing this? What outcomes make it worth trying to connect neighborhoods online inclusively? We compared how different folks were recruited and how different types of folks use the forums or not. Questions about impact were important. For example, did participants go

to more community meetings? We asked whether people engaged in civic activities before joining the forums and did they do it more because of their participation in BeNeighbors. We also had a question about whether they got to know more people of different races and ethnicities (for the survey questions and results of the evaluation, see <http://blog.e-democracy.org/posts/2610>).

Deliberation in Marginalized Groups

AKR: What do you think of pursuing equity by promoting enclave or affinity group deliberation among marginalized groups as one stage of a larger discussion by broader cross-sections of the public? How do you link those kinds of conversations to each other?

Clift: Yes, how do you create safe places for people to connect before they get thrown into the wild of the broader community? One thing about neighborhoods is that they are organized in the common interest, but also share a unique special interest in that we all live here. And that makes them—even if they are public—a safer entry point for discussion.

Our outreach workers noted to us, Facebook really was a trusted space for the African-American community, for the Latino Community, for the Somali Minnesotan community. There is a Minnesota Somali Facebook Group with over 20,000 members. There is an Eritrean Facebook Group, and Ethiopians and Liberians have groups—there are all kinds of online spaces within these silos of ethnicity. So if I were to take our lessons and we were going to try to create inclusive community spaces on Facebook, I would be contacting these people who run all of these different ethnic Facebook Groups—getting permission to post or asking them to post an invite—doing things to connect people who have created these trusted spaces, trying to bring them together because they are all basically using the same sort of community facilitation skillset, but they don't know each other. They have never been connected and they have all been virtual, so there are a lot of opportunities in a region like the Twin Cities to not only embrace the existing ethnic connections that are happening, but to also say, “Where are the gaps, and where could we work to try to help foster more of these types of safer spaces?” While these are often private Facebook Groups, they could be coupled with neighborhood forums, like the ones we created through BeNeighbors.

What could you do to try to diversify the voices in the neighborhood spaces that exist, no matter what platform they are on? For example, there are spaces that exist now on Facebook in North Minneapolis. It's a heavily African-American

area, and there is also a Hmong population up there, but I don't see very many Hmong names on those forums. And in the Highland neighborhood of St. Paul, I had someone, and I assume she was white, who said, "I want to create a Facebook Group instead of using your forum." The neighborhood is a relatively wealthy white area with a cluster of Ethiopians in the southern chunk of this neighborhood where we were doing targeted outreach. I said, "Why don't we work together?" And she said, "We're going to reach out to different people than you are," and I said, "Who? What does that mean?" The person in the end said, "I just want to use Facebook," and I think that was more her motivating factor – the platform – than a lack of interest in our commitment to a unified forum with outreach to immigrants, renters, etc. And that space is now much bigger than ours, but there's not much diversity and I just think it is highly unfortunate.

Today, I wonder what we could do to make the tens of thousands of neighborhood Facebook Groups far more inclusive and representative of the populations that actually live there. Could we take the "just ask" lesson and the value of in-person community outreach to other platforms? What can technology or targeted advertising do? What are the limits of what volunteers can do and what frankly needs resources to build real bridges across race and more in local online communities? I fear that the gated community model, creating digital spaces that are designed to be comfortable for home-owning households who are also the most attractive to advertisers, is what the venture funding from Silicon Valley will give us. I don't want to live in a gated community, be it physical or virtual.

I think that we could also be a lot more intentional about creating new community-wide online spaces that gather the heat of different incidents, such as crime or use of force by the police, and then try to frame them in a way that could bring in more voices, not just the loudest voices. We had a case in Seward just south of the predominately East African neighborhood of Cedar Riverside where there was a tragic triple murder. Two Somali teenagers in a grocery store in a burglary gone bad killed three immigrants from different East African countries. In the Seward forum for the neighborhood where the incident happened, you had lots of folks who are mainly homeowners talking about calling 911, seeing a shooter running down the sidewalk, talking about the response to violent crime. And then to the north on our Cedar Riverside forum, just across the freeway, where we had done all of the Somali outreach and East African outreach, you had people talking on the forum about the funeral arrangements of the people who were shot. It was a real contrast. The idea of a candlelight vigil started on the Seward forum, and then it spread to other forums, and that resulted in 300 people, with an East African majority, turning out for the vigil, even though the person whose idea it was wasn't East African.

We have an outline for a “New Voices” project, which would create a learning network of immigrant emerging leaders in their twenties and thirties. It would be very intentional about saying, “Well, if you can act within your ethnicity via Facebook Groups or other means, let's create a safe place for you to trade notes online with each other, but also combine that with some physical face-to-face networking, and build trust over time.” One challenge is that some local funders are cool to anything that involves technology because it means exclusivity to them. They may see us as middle-class do-gooders because we're coming at things from an integrationist approach. And these funders get plenty of proposals from ethnically-oriented organizations that are truly, authentically, deeply connected to their communities. But I think that a mixture of face-to-face networking combined with online exchanges could do a lot to connect our next generation of civic leaders in our community.

There's an opportunity to really think about how you create a mix of online spaces for a geographic region that are ethnically diverse, but also that connect people across ethnicity with specialized interests. It might connect people who work in nonprofits, or people who do political activism, and the whole immigrant integration community. I think the Internet could be used as an ultimate icebreaker to make it much more friendly for immigrants and refugees coming into our communities to be embraced and to be connected.

Balancing Equality and Equity

AKR: Are there tensions between the need to treat people similarly (equally) and the need to take special steps to promote participation and influence by the least advantaged (equity)?

Clift: Even with our two-posts-a-day or three-posts-a-day rule, you might have more voices, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you getting everyone to speak up in a certain area.

One reason is that there can be a trade-off between promoting inclusive speech and freedom of speech. We have had cases where some trusted people who are still active on our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood forum joined our citywide forum and felt that some of the criticisms of Muslims or Somalis in the community...well, they didn't appreciate them! The citywide forum is an especially free space, and if you're not willing to defend yourself, then no one else will defend you. If we recruited people from a minority ethnic or religious group but they are not appreciating the freer speech aspect of that space and not wanting

to have to be defensive, it's fair for them to say, "Hey, I don't want to have to be considered guilty until I prove that I'm a good Minnesotan." That's fair. We were asked to intervene more sharply against someone who said something that upset some Somalis. In that case, though, our democratic principle trumped other concerns. We said, "Actually, they didn't break our rules and they didn't do any name-calling. It was just that their opinion was strong, and I really encourage you to show the other side and make sure that that view is seen." The Somali guy basically said, "I don't want to play around on the citywide forum anymore. It's not worth my time." We get that also from elected officials. Because it's a citywide forum, it's more political and it is a harsher environment. At the neighborhood level, we have intervened much more when people have gone off the rails, in part because it directly impacts our inclusion goals. We've said, "We're not going to let you take that further."

I think our forum engagement frame was before its time in a social media setting. I wish that we had guides on how and why to make your Facebook Group represent your neighborhood. We want to take our lessons and generalize them for any technology and do some experimental projects with neighborhood forums around the country that want to be part of an effort to reflect the great diversity of their community. How do we build immigrant and refugee integration into the civic technology online engagement agenda? I think it has huge potential. But it can't just be done using the frame of politics or political participation. It needs to be framed first as community involvement that builds social capital broadly across the community in an open, welcoming, friendly place.

References

- Coleman, S., & Shane, P. M. (2011). *Connecting democracy: Online consultation and the flow of political communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Davies, T., & Gangadharan, S. P. (2009). *Online deliberation: Design, research, and practice*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Doheny-Farina, S. (1996). *The wired neighborhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- E-Democracy.org (2011). *Inclusive social media project: Participatory evaluation*. Retrieved from <http://e-democracy.org/if/edeminclusivefordeval.pdf>.
- E-Democracy.org (2016). *BeNeighbors inclusive community engagement online - project information*. Retrieved from <http://forums.e-democracy.org/projects/engage/beneighbors-iceo>.
- Nabatchi, T., & Leighninger, M. (2015). *Public participation for 21st century democracy*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.
- Lu, D., & Farzan, R. (2015, March). *When to break the ice: Self-disclosure strategies for newcomers in online communities*. Poster presented at CSCW, Vancouver, BC, Canada.