Inclusive Social Media Project: Participatory Evaluation (2010)

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1 Executive Summary: Overview and Key Learnings

This section provides an overview of the objectives and methodology for this participatory evaluation, and then highlights key learnings.

1.1 Objectives and Framing

This participatory evaluation of E-Democracy.org's Inclusive Social Media project responds to the Ford Foundation grant supporting this work, as well as key goals of E-Democracy's Strategic Plan. A complete description of E-Democracy's Inclusive Social Media project can be found on our website at http://pages.e-democracy.org/Inclusive_Social_Media.

The primary objectives of E-Democracy's Inclusive Social Media project are as follows:

- Demonstrate that neighborhood-based online forums can and should work in high-immigrant, low-income, racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods
- Identify how such success is accomplished
- Serve as a platform to help improve the success of others pursuing similar goals
- Increase interest by other funders to expand such efforts

At the beginning of this project, E-Democracy executive director Steven Clift framed our commitment, making clear that within the online community dialogues and spaces we host, with intent we can and should increase the diversity of participation and content by doing the following:

- Reaching out to and engaging people from communities who are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically underrepresented on neighborhood online forums[1]
- Identifying community and cultural organizations and individuals, elected officials, neighborhood organizations, and other local leaders to intentionally contribute more information and conversation to the forums – what we call "digital inclusion for community voices"
- Moving forums beyond token experiences where the diversity "in the room" is recruited, but silent or essentially ignored

Through this work, E-Democracy hopes to debunk assumptions that people in poverty, of color, new immigrants, and others historically disenfranchised are digitally disconnected or less interested in connecting with their neighbors online than those in homogeneous, wealthy neighborhoods – and instead demonstrate that they in fact bring assets, capacities, information, and agenda-setting value to online civic participation.

To this end, two high-immigrant, low-income, racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods were selected for this Minnesota-based project: Frogtown in St. Paul and Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis.

[1] *According to the "Neighbors Online" report released in June 2010 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 7% of Internet users report being members of neighborhood e-mail lists of forums. While Whites and African-Americans participate equally at 8%, those in households making over $75,000 a year are 5 times more likely to belong than those making $50,000 or less (15% versus 3%). Latinos participate at 3%. While there are not data on more recent immigrant groups, we suspect it is even less nationally.*

1.2 Methodology and Program Outcomes Evaluated

Central to this evaluation effort was determining the suitability and value of our approach and methods relative to outcomes – what we can learn from the results to inform our future work and that of others committed to inclusive online engagement.

We chose a participatory approach that relies on the insights and wisdom of the outreach staff, volunteer forum managers, and numerous participants in our Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside Neighborhood Forums, supplemented with simple data analyses of forum posts and posters.

The program outcomes evaluated are as follows:

- Develop outreach and information leadership-development structures and techniques
- Increase forum size, diversity, energy, and community-building potential
- Engage community organizers, community organizations and institutions, and elected officials

1.3 Key Learnings

1.3.1 Outreach

> ***It could be better. It could always be better. Cedar-Riverside is very diverse, so more voices are needed on the forum.***
> ***—Julia Nekessa Opoti, Cedar-Riverside outreach staff***

We learned a great deal about how to attract and retain forum members in these high-poverty, high-immigrant neighborhoods, and believe these lessons apply across the full range of E-Democracy forums.

- The fact that our forums are online doesn't change how people make decisions to participate – or not – in one of our forums. Face-to-face connections, paper signup sheets, and a personal approach are by far the most successful recruiting methods.
- Building trust is essential. Knowing that "someone like me" is on the forum makes a difference. Personal invitations and direct support help people get started.
- Understanding people's needs and then helping them find ways for those needs to be addressed through the forum smoothes the path for their participation and continued involvement.
- Partnering with respected neighbors and event organizers creates opportunities to participate in community activities and offer people the chance to sign up for our forums.

1.3.2 Content and Participant Diversity and Animation

As discussed in detail in Section 5, intentional content "seeding" by E-Democracy staff, volunteers, or forum members, accompanied by some level of active support and encouragement for participants has a huge impact on content and participant diversity. That combination of seeding and support helps set a welcoming and inclusive tone that in turn increases the numbers of forum member and participants and likely adds to forum stability.

We have also seen that the Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside neighborhood forums have a less intimate feel than some others in the E-Democracy network because they've stayed more issue-oriented rather than having a large base of community life exchanges. In all cases we are aiming for that "tipping point"[2] of around 10% of the households, and have to find ways to make that work whether community residents are renters or homeowners. In some cases there have been active exchanges about community

2 "Minority Rules: Scientists Discover Tipping Point for the Spread of Ideas," Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, http://news.rpi.edu/update.do?artcenterkey=2902, 25 July 2011.

life issues such as child care or school choice or safety, and as we discuss in the section on Age, Digital Capacity, and Forum Relevance, there is more work needed to help a cross-section of community members see neighborhood forums as great places to ask questions and share information.

1.3.3 Cultural Competency

Issues around culture, home language, race, and ethnicity are central to all of these discussions, whether around who is reaching out to whom, who posts and who doesn't, or the content of the posts. Being able to discuss the forum with cultural awareness and in the community member's home language is essential. In high-immigrant and racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods, one outreach staff person cannot reach all communities. Building and supporting an active and diverse forum base will increase capacity and forum sustainability. At minimum, everyone involved in outreach or forum leadership must be able to demonstrate cultural awareness and cultural proficiency, and continually evolve on both fronts along with the communities they serve.

Both forums and especially Cedar-Riverside have also been challenged because many of the forum's posters have English as their second or even third language. And on both forums members not only speak different languages and dialects but also cross cultures, races, sexes, political affiliations, ages, affinity groups, and so on. The understood challenges to email communications are compounded many times when both forum posters and readers are e-talking across such diversity.

There are also complex cross-cultural and cross-gender issues as noted in the Culture, Race, Power – and Gender section, especially when the inherent transparency of an E-Democracy forum post or exchange gives community members information about someone that they wouldn't otherwise have. Additional and very real dynamics that we did not explore in this project include the high number of immigrants on both forums who may currently or recently have been at war with each other "at home," as well as the varied and sometimes volatile legal status of some immigrants.

1.3.4 Forum Structure and Leadership

While issues around culture, language, and power are explicitly not E-Democracy's responsibility, we must nonetheless be aware of and sensitive to their implications on our forums, and consider ways we can design, structure, or run our forums that help minimize or mitigate unintended negative impacts on forum members.

Even that limited scope seems daunting, but we learned that E-Democracy's forum outreach staff made exceptional headway on both forums by putting in an average of only about 7 hours a week. In addition to these two paid contractors, the neighborhood residents serving as volunteer Forum Managers contributed to this effort. That means the cost of effectively engaging and supporting forum participation – particularly at startup – is extremely low, making it realistically replicable.

We also need to continue providing support as each forum defines its own tone and tenor, style, and energy. Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside "feel" *very* different from each other, and equally different from other neighborhood forums and the larger citywide forums around them. That is, of course, a positive measure of the localness of these forums, but as each forum settles into its own rhythm it's not always easy for E-Democracy to discern what is "normal" within that forum community compared to what we're accustomed to seeing elsewhere.

1.3.5 Moving Forward

Having already shared several lessons, the best insight gained from our intensive outreach and support in 2010 is a much deeper understanding of the potential of our neighborhood forums to increase civic engagement and accountability.

Neighbors told us the forum has provided them with new information and alternative viewpoints. We learned that elected officials pay attention to posts appearing on the forum, even if only a few post. Community organizations that found ways to actively participate found it relevant and rewarding. We believe all of this is a testament to the hard work of community members – those who participate in their forum and who volunteer to keep it healthy, respectful, supportive, and animated.

The range and depth of conversations on the forum is dependent on forum members' willingness to share their opinions, ask questions, and seek input from people of many backgrounds. Thought of another way, the success of the forum is circular, where the participation of all members sparks newer, far richer, and increased numbers of conversations, expanding the circle and emboldening all participants.

Finally, while this evaluation of our inclusion efforts in Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside is for 2010, E-Democracy continued to actively support these efforts in 2011 with a substantial additional grant from the Ford Foundation that deepened both our outreach and the sustainability of these forums. In 2012 we were awarded a major grant from the Knight Foundation to fund our three-year Inclusive Community Engagement Online initiative. Current information on all our work can be found at http://e-democracy.org/inclusion.

2 Purpose and Approach

This section explains the objectives of this participatory evaluation, how we framed and focused the work, and our methodology.

2.1 Objectives

This participatory evaluation of E-Democracy.org's Inclusive Social Media project responds to the Ford Foundation grant supporting this work, as well as key goals of E-Democracy's Strategic Plan. A complete description of E-Democracy's Inclusive Social Media project can be found on our website at http://pages.e-democracy.org/Inclusive_Social_Media.

The primary objectives of E-Democracy's Inclusive Social Media project are as follows:

- Demonstrate that neighborhood-based online forums[3] can and should work in high-immigrant, low-income, racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods
- Identify how such success is accomplished
- Serve as a platform to help improve the success of others pursuing similar goals
- Increase interest by other funders to expand such efforts

The Ford Foundation will use these results as part of their review of the efficacy of this funded project.

This evaluation also informs E-Democracy's work tied to two of its Strategic Plan goals as follows:

- **Engagement:** Strengthen, broaden, and diversify engagement through effective, meaningful, and informed online discussion and exchange on public issues by actively engaging people from diverse and less represented communities to participate in E-Democracy projects.
- **Active Citizenship:** Empower people through interactions, experiences, and online skills to have an impact on their communities and governments.

The E-Democracy Board will use these results as part of their routine review of progress against the Strategic Plan. Key lessons will be shared publicly online.

2.2 Framing

At the beginning of this effort, E-Democracy executive director Steven Clift framed our commitment, making clear that within the online community dialogues and spaces we host, with intent we can and should increase the diversity by the following:

- Reaching out to and engaging people from communities who are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically underrepresented on neighborhood online forums[4]

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[3] *E-Democracy.org uses "issues forums" to describe place-based online forums geared toward local public issues. At the neighborhood level the term "neighbors forum" is used more commonly and indicates a wider range of content and exchanges about community life. The citywide online townhall-style issues forums in Minneapolis and St. Paul started in the late 1990s, although E-Democracy's first neighborhood-level experiment actually started in Bristol, England in 2007. Extensive background is available from: http://e-democracy.org/if.*

[4] *According to the "Neighbors Online" report released in June 2010 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 7% of Internet users report being members of neighborhood email lists or forums. While Whites and African-Americans participate equally at 8%, those in households making over $75,000 a year are 5 times more likely to belong than those making $50,000 or less (15% versus 3%). Latinos participate at 3%. While there are not data on more recent immigrant groups, we suspect it is even less nationally.*

- Identifying community and cultural organizations and individuals, elected officials, neighborhood organizations, and other local leaders to intentionally contribute more information and conversation to the forums (we call this "digital inclusion for community voices")
- Moving forums beyond token experiences where the diversity "in the room" is recruited, but silent or essentially ignored

Through this work, E-Democracy hoped to debunk assumptions that people in poverty, of color, new immigrants, and others historically disenfranchised are digitally disconnected or less interested in connecting with their neighbors online than those in homogeneous, wealthy neighborhoods – and instead demonstrate that they in fact bring assets, capacities, information, and agenda-setting value to online civic participation.

Further, E-Democracy led a strategic shift by extending the online townhall-style "issues forums" from the citywide to neighborhood-level community life exchanges. During this report's 2010 timeframe, a number of all-volunteer or unfunded "neighbors forums" were launched in nearby middle-income neighborhoods, and both E-Democracy and key national funders of this work support greater online participation to promote local government accountability and engagement.

2.3 Forum Focus, Outreach Funding, and Timeline

Two high-immigrant, low-income, racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods were selected for this project, Frogtown in St. Paul and Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis, from and evaluated from late 2009 through 2010. Both forums were in place prior to then as a result of early grant funding:

- A grant of $25,000 from the Minneapolis Foundation funded initial outreach to communities of color and new immigrants in Cedar-Riverside in 2008-09
- A grant of $7,500 from the Knight Foundation extended outreach to similar communities in Frogtown in summer 2009

These early grants helped to create a more racially/ ethnically/ linguistically diverse membership in both the Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown forums, and established a baseline number of forum members in each.

It is on that foundation that this Inclusive Social Media project was launched, allowing this effort to focus on deepening the authentic participation of existing members from the target communities rather than building new forums from scratch. This evaluation thus explores what we call "second-generation" forums.

> ***E-Democracy.org has been our platform to talk to each other and raise our issues with government officials. Without this forum, our voices in our neighborhood would have been silent. I thank all the volunteers and the management of E-Democracy for giving me and others in Cedar-Riverside the chance to air our ideas and concerns.***
> ***—Mohamed Ali, Cedar-Riverside forum member***

2.4 Methodology

Central to this evaluation effort was determining the suitability and value of our approach and methods relative to outcomes – what we could learn from the results to inform our future work and that of others committed to inclusive online engagement.

While there are various legitimate methods of evaluating results, we chose a participatory approach. This relies heavily on the insights and wisdom of the outreach staff, volunteer forum managers, and numerous participants in our Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside Forums, supplemented with simple data analyses of posts and posters. The program outcomes and key questions for the evaluation were as follows:

1. **Program Outcome: Develop outreach and information leadership development structures and techniques**
   a. What outreach and information leadership development did E-Democracy do?
   b. What were the results?
   c. How might those results be used by E-Democracy and other organizations to foster inclusive civic engagement?

2. **Program Outcome: Increase forum size, diversity, energy, and community-building potential**
   a. How successfully did E-Democracy:
      - Recruit more participants?
      - Deepen the diversity of participants on the forums?
      - Expand and deepen the diversity of forum posts?
   b. In what ways did E-Democracy "animate" the diversity in the forums?
   c. In what ways do posts and posters on the forums display a sense of community belonging, as well as government, institutional, and community accountability?

3. **Program Outcome: Engage community organizers, community organizations and institutions, and elected officials**
   a. In what ways did E-Democracy connect with and encourage proactive use by community organizers? Community organizations and institutions? Elected officials?
   b. Do these individuals/groups have particularly unique or different roles on the forum?
   c. How are community organizers and elected officials using the forums for active listening?

In addressing these evaluation questions in this report, what you will hear most clearly are the voices of the participants – woven into the narrative, presented in bullet form, and quoted. This content comes from numerous interviews conducted by E-Democracy outreach staff with forum members, forum participants, and other identified community stakeholders, and interviews the report author conducted with outreach staff, forum managers, and the executive director. Where it is relevant or necessary for meaning, we have distinguished between content from one or the other forum; otherwise, the content applies generally or to both forums.

The report is organized using program outcomes as the section breaks, and each begins with a reminder of the guiding questions. We address those using a structure that presents the wisdom of the speakers locally and coherently – rather than a forced march through the questions. We also persist in the first person throughout this report because it most responsibly conveys the perspectives of our contributors.

The striking panoply of voices presented in this report is matched in richness and insight only by the Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown forum members themselves, with whom E-Democracy created and continues to grow and support engagement through our Inclusive Social Media project.

3 Demographics of Target Neighborhoods

The two high-immigrant, low-income, racially and ethnically diverse urban neighborhoods selected for this project were Frogtown in St. Paul and Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis, as profiled below.

3.1 Frogtown, St. Paul

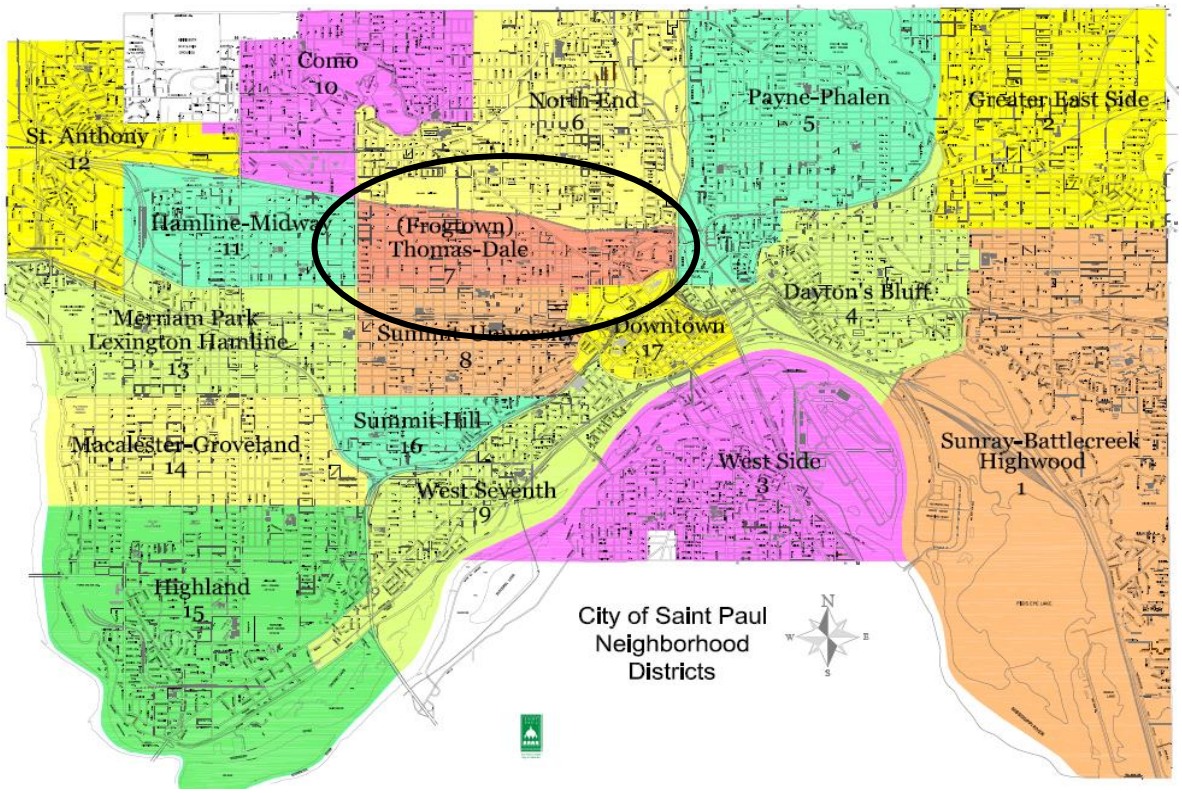
According to the Frogtown Neighborhood Association (District 7 Planning Council), Frogtown was initially populated by Polish, German, Scandinavian, and Irish immigrants in the mid-to-late 1800s as residents spilled over from the adjacent downtown. Many of the earliest residents were employed by the railroad that runs just north of the neighborhood.

The exact origin of the name "Frogtown" remains a subject of discussion, but this much appears to be certain: The moniker was derived from the prevalence of frogs in what was originally a swampy, sparsely populated section of town. In fact, many of the early homes built in the neighborhood began to sink into the unstable ground. Early German residents of the area called it Froschburg – literally Frog City.

3.1.1 History and Geography[5]

The neighborhood is rectangular-shaped with four definitive boundaries: Interstate 35E on the east side,

***Figure 1*: Frogtown within context of all St. Paul neighborhoods**



[5] *History and Geography information is from the Frogtown Neighborhood Association website*

University Avenue on the south, Lexington Avenue on the west, and Pierce Butler on the north side. University Avenue has long been the key commercial hub of the neighborhood. In 1890 the first inter-city street car line was introduced on University Avenue linking St. Paul and Minneapolis. Other street car lines operated on Thomas Avenue, Dale Street, Lexington Parkway, and Rice Street. The street cars were eliminated when automobiles became prevalent, but the Central Corridor light rail line is slated to open along University in 2014.

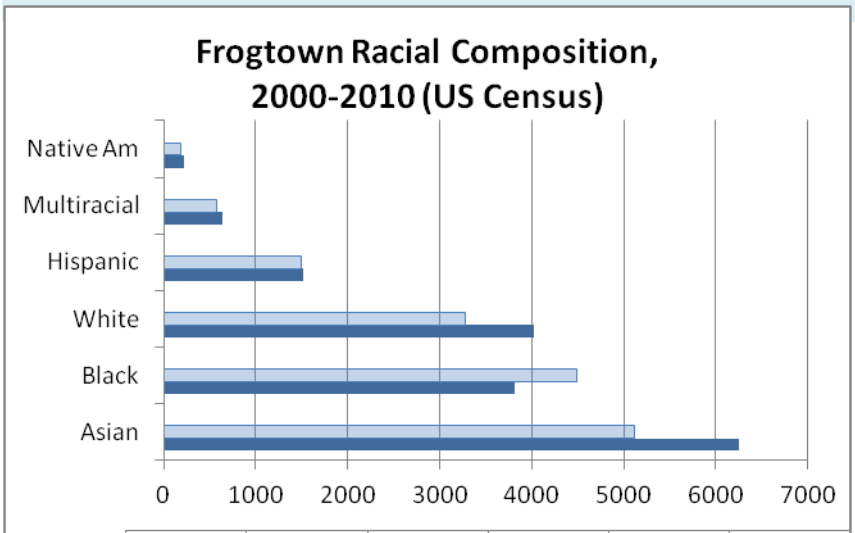
Like many U.S. urban centers, neighborhoods like Frogtown on the edge of downtown tend to have less expensive housing stock and are often a haven for immigrants. In the 1960s when the Summit-University/Rondo neighborhood to the south was split in half to make way for Interstate 94, many families from that traditionally African-American neighborhood migrated north into Frogtown. Since the 1980s Frogtown has been most strongly influenced by immigrants and refugees, particularly Hmong, Latino, and Somali.

3.1.2 Race and Ethnicity

According to a *New York Times* presentation of the 2010 U.S. Census data[6], the Frogtown neighborhood had 15,127 residents, of whom 33.8% were Asian, 29.6% were Black, 21.7% were White, 9.8% were Hispanic, 3.8% were Multiracial, and 1.2% were Native American.

From 2000 to 2010 Frogtown saw a population decline of 1,315 residents (8%). Within this, the Black population increased at the same rate the White and Asian populations decreased, along with other groups.

***Figure 2*: Frogtown racial composition change, 2000-2010**



	Asian	Black	White	Hispanic	Multiracial	Native Am
Change	-18%	18%	-18%	-1%	-9%	-14%
2010	5111	4484	3280	1488	579	184
2000	6252	3813	4017	1510	634	215

3.1.3 Socioeconomics

At the time of this report, the U.S. Census Bureau 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates[7] provided the most current socioeconomic data available at the census tract level. The 2005-09 ACS total population estimate for Frogtown was 13,277 as compared to the 15,127 residents reported in the *New York Times* presentation of the 2010 U.S. Census data, a 13% discrepancy.

Accordingly, the sections below apply projected percentages from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate to the 2010 U.S. Census data as presented by the *New York Times*.

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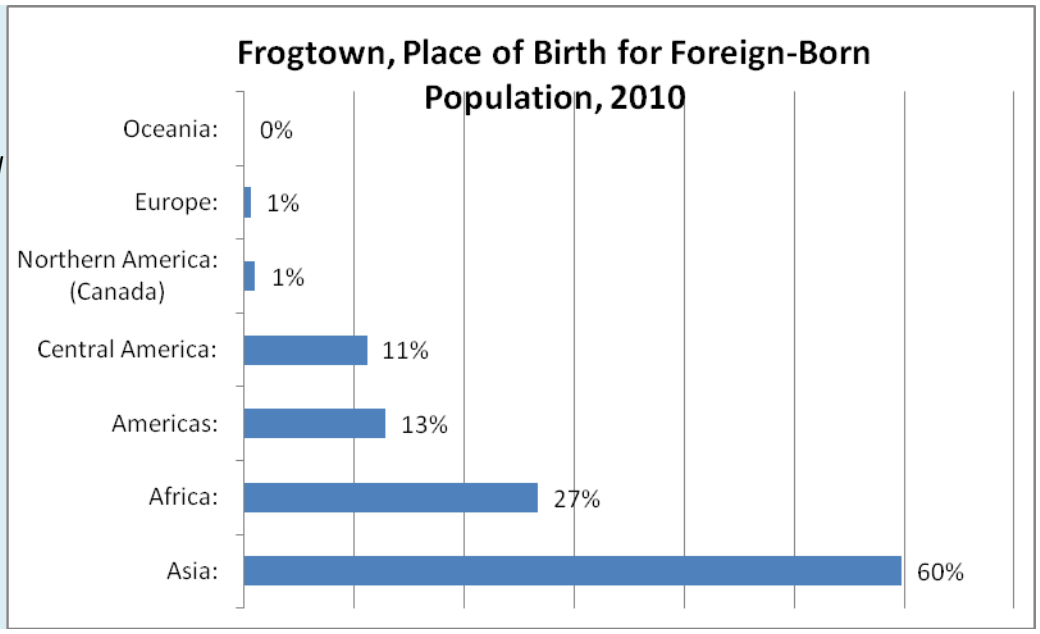
6 Bloch, Matthew, Shan Carter, and Alan McLean. "Mapping the 2010 U.S. Census," New York Times; http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/map?hp; 6 October 2011. Note: A new source for extended neighborhood census analysis is the Minnesota Compass project: http://www.mncompass.org/twincities/neighborhoods.php, specifically http://www.mncompass.org/_pdfs/neighborhood-profiles/StPaul-FrogtownThomasDale-102011.pdf and http://www.mncompass.org/_pdfs/neighborhood-profiles/Minneapolis-CedarRiverside-102011.pdf.

7 U.S. Census Bureau; 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Census Tracts 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, Ramsey County, Minnesota; American FactFinder, http://factfinder.census.gov, 6 October 2011.

3.1.3.1 Place of Birth and Citizenship

***Figure 3*: Frogtown place of birth**
Frogtown is an extremely diverse, high-immigrant neighborhood with a third of the population (5,007 residents) born outside of the United States. Of the foreign-born residents, 60% were born in Asia, primarily Laos (most are ethnic Hmong), Thailand, and Vietnam, and 27% were born in Africa, primarily Ethiopia.



Of the foreign-born residents in Frogtown, 44% gained citizenship through naturalization.

Frogtown Citizenship Status	% ACS	Applied to *NYT* 2010 Data
U.S. citizen, born in the United States	66.7%	10,089
U.S. citizen, born abroad of American parent(s)	0.2%	31
U.S. citizen by naturalization	**14.5%**	**2,189**
Not a U.S. citizen	18.6%	2,819
		15,127

3.1.3.2 Income

Over 41% of Frogtown residents live below the 2011 federal poverty level[8] of $10,890 for an individual and $22,350 for a household of four. The federal poverty level calculation was established in the 1960s and there's been concern that it fails to reflect the current cost of living. Many researchers and practitioners have adopted 200% of the federal poverty level as a proxy for low income.[9] The American Community Survey reports data for people at or above 150% of the poverty level.

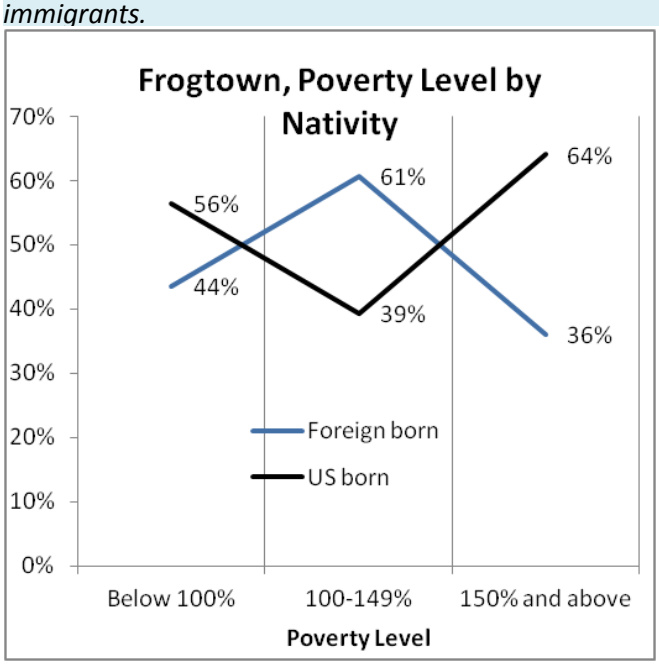
More foreign-born than U.S.-born Frogtown residents live in poverty, but not necessarily in deeper poverty.

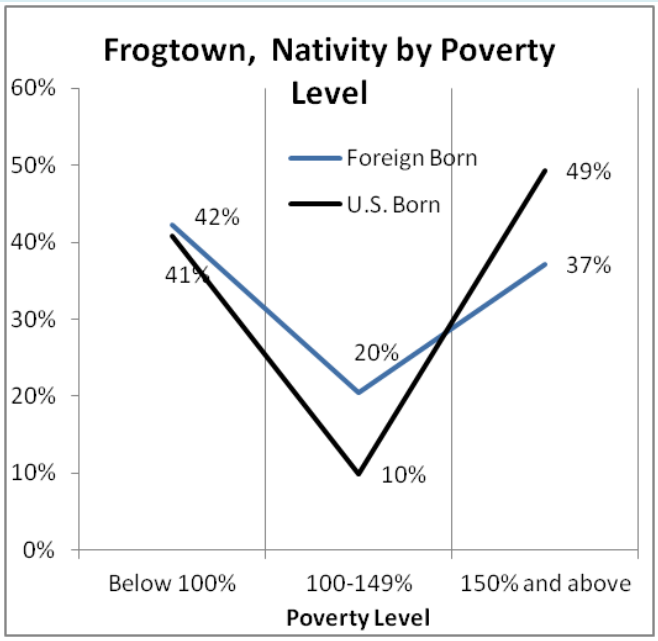
- 49% of U.S.-born Frogtown residents live at or above 150% of the poverty level
- 37% of foreign-born Frogtown residents live at or above 150%

8 Poverty Income Guidelines (2011), University of Minnesota Extension; updated June 1, 2011, http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/00151.pdf, 6 October 2011.
9 Cauthen, Nancy K., "Testimony on Measuring Poverty in America," National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), August 2007; http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_752.html, 6 October 2011.

***Figure 4*: Frogtown poverty and nativity**
The left chart shows that of people living at each poverty level, there are more US-born residents among the extremely poor (below 100% of the poverty level), as well as more at 150% and above the poverty level.

The right chart shows there is less income gap among foreign-born residents than among US-born residents, and the higher percentage of foreign-born in the 100-149% may suggest some upward mobility among these new immigrants.





3.2 Cedar-Riverside, Minneapolis

The Cedar-Riverside neighborhood is just east of downtown Minneapolis and about 6.5 miles west of St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood. With several iconic high-rise apartment buildings, the intersection of two important commercial streets, and the University of Minnesota at its center, this community is dense and vibrant.

According to the City of Minneapolis, the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood is named after the intersection of the two main avenues Cedar and Riverside. The neighborhood is triangular-shaped with three definitive boundaries: the Mississippi River on the east side, Interstate 94 to the south, and Interstate 35W on the west side.

Cedar-Riverside's history is nearly as old as the City of Minneapolis. In the late 1890s, the area was known as "Snoose Boulevard," with a thriving community of Scandinavian immigrants, many of whom worked in the milling and lumber industries on the Mississippi River. In the 1960s and 1970s, the area

***Figure 5*: Cedar-Riverside housing, December 2010.** *Photo by forum member Mohamed Ali, posted on E-Democracy.org*

changed from a quaint neighborhood to a beehive of hippies, intellectuals, actors, artists, and musicians. The current Cedar-Riverside neighborhood boasts the largest community of immigrants in the Twin Cities, continuing a long history of ethnic and cultural diversity.

According to the *New York Times* presentation of the 2010 U.S. Census data[10], the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood had 8,094 residents, of whom 45% were Black, 37% White, 11% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 3% Multiracial, and 1% Native American.

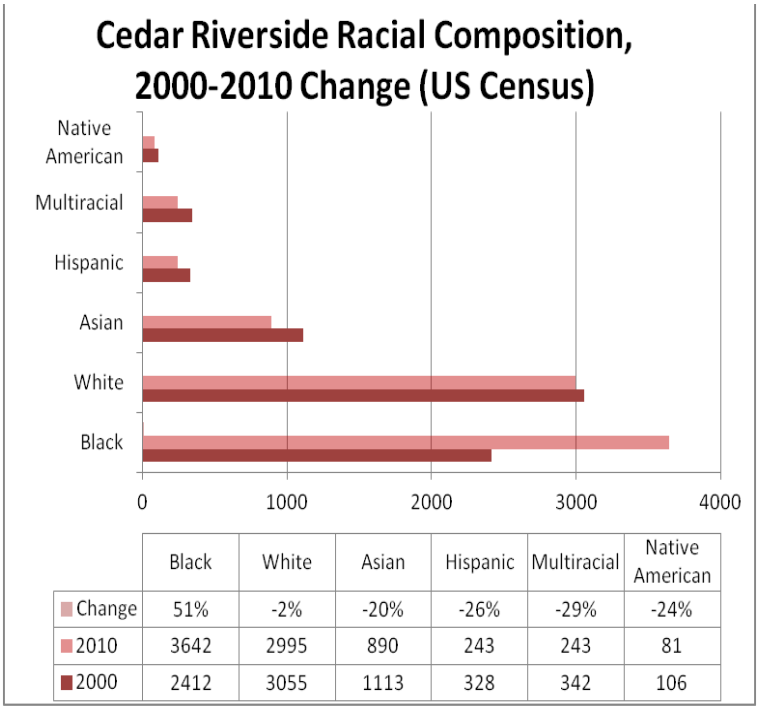
From 2000 to 2010 the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood saw a population increase of 748 residents, 7.4% of the total population. While the Black population increased by 44% from 2,412 to 3,642 residents, the Asian population declined by 25% (223), Multiracial declined by 41% (99), Hispanic declined by 35% (85), and White declined by 2% (60).

3.2.1 Socioeconomics

Again using the socioeconomic data provided in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates,[11] the total population for Cedar-Riverside was 7,266 as compared to the 8,094 residents reported in the *New York Times* presentation of the 2010 U.S. Census data, a 10% discrepancy.

Accordingly, the sections below apply the percent of population projected in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate to the 2010 U.S. Census data as presented by the *New York Times*.

***Figure 6*: Cedar-Riverside, change in racial composition, 2000-2010**



	Black	White	Asian	Hispanic	Multiracial	Native American
Change	51%	-2%	-20%	-26%	-29%	-24%
2010	3642	2995	890	243	243	81
2000	2412	3055	1113	328	342	106

[10] *Bloch, Matthew, Shan Carter, and Alan McLean. "Mapping the 2010 U.S. Census," New York Times; http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/map?hp; 6 October 2011.*

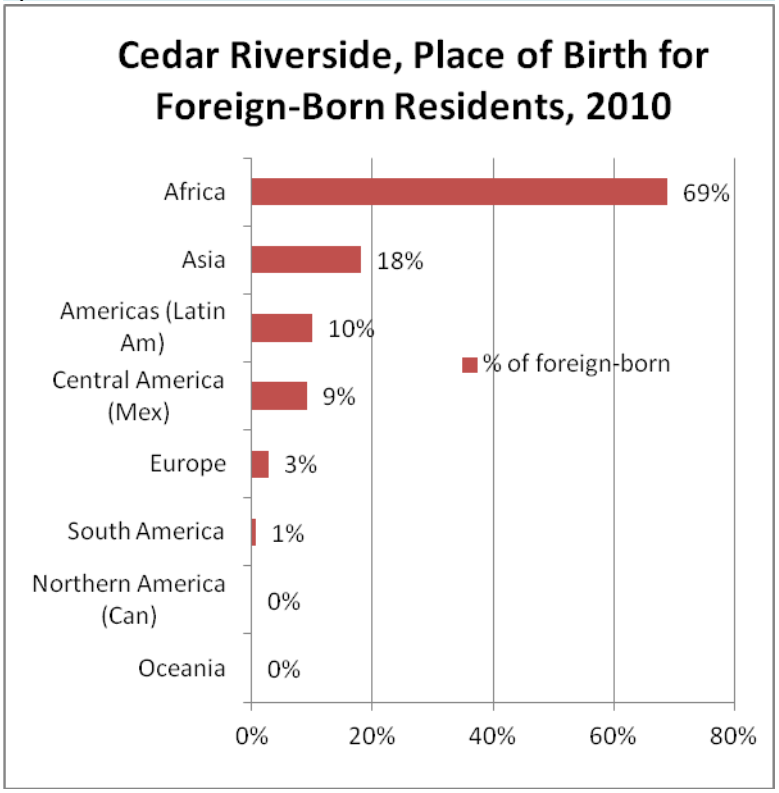
11 U.S. Census Bureau; 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Census Tract 1048, Hennepin County, Minnesota; American FactFinder, http://factfinder.census.gov; (21 October 2011.

3.2.1.1 Place of Birth and Citizenship

Cedar-Riverside is an extremely diverse, high-immigrant neighborhood with 41% of the population or 3,359 residents born outside of the United States.

***Figure 7*: Cedar-Riverside, place of birth for foreign-born residents**

Of the foreign-born residents, nearly 70% were born in Africa, primarily eastern Africa. A huge percentage of these east Africans are Somali and Oromo.



In Cedar-Riverside, 35% of the 3,359 foreign-born residents gained citizenship through naturalization.

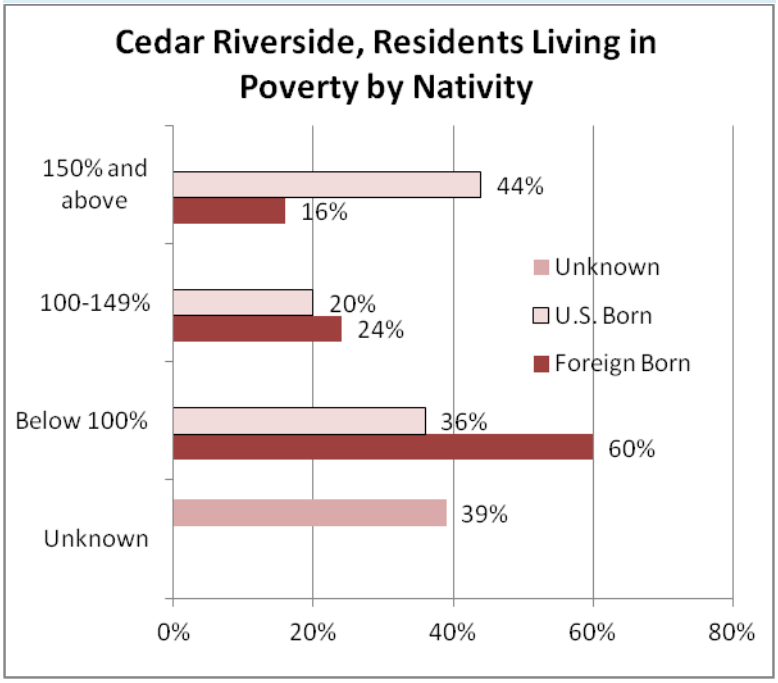
Citizenship Status	% ACS	Applied to NYT 2010 Data
U.S. citizen, born in the United States	57%	4,608
U.S. citizen, born abroad of American parent(s)	2%	127
U.S. citizen by naturalization	**15%**	**1,187**
Not a U.S. citizen	27%	2,171
		8,094

3.2.1.2 Income

Note that income data were reported for just 71% of Cedar-Riverside residents, which contrasted with 100% reporting for Frogtown residents.

For that portion of the population for whom income data were available, 49% lived below the federal poverty level, 22% lived at 100-149% of the poverty level, and 29% lived at or above 150% of the poverty level.

***Figure 8*: Cedar-Riverside residents in poverty by nativity**
Poverty is much higher among foreign-born residents of Cedar-Riverside: 44% of U.S.-born residents lived at or above 150% of the poverty level, whereas just 16% of foreign-born residents lived at or above 150%.



4 Program Outcome: Develop Outreach and Information Leadership Development Structures and Techniques

Guiding Questions

- What outreach and information leadership development did E-Democracy do?
- What were the results?
- How might those results be used by E-Democracy and other organizations to foster inclusive civic engagement?

4.1 Outreach Strategies to Create a Neighborhood Presence

An essential factor underlying this work was E-Democracy's early decision to support participation based on technology that is most inclusive and that users prefer – meaning we chose email as the default point of access, carefully integrated with web-based and social media options. In short, anyone who can press "reply all" can publish to an E-Democracy online forum.

An important hypothesis in E-Democracy's structured effort to engage nontraditional participants is this: Without proactive outreach, teaching, and content seeding, community capacity around a specific forum may still emerge but it may:

- Take considerably longer
- Be triggered only by a particular situation or event
- Be either unsustained or unsustainable

As a result, central to our outreach effort was hiring local people to build on their existing community knowledge, relationships, insights, and perspectives to do the work as they thought best – and the bulk of what they did was face-to-face.

A common assumption when launching a new online local forum or website is that most participants will find their way to a forum through various online promotions, links, and online sharing. While that may be true among some groups, online recruitment is neither broad nor deep enough to be effective in high-immigrant, low-income, racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

> *When I reach out to communities where I'd be seen as foreign, perhaps we can all be seen as part of the same struggle to make a better community – that may be where we find commonality…I don't have to be a Black person to relate to a Black person. We can have conversations about what's affecting our community and what we can do together to change.*
> *—Marny Xiong, Frogtown Forum outreach staff*

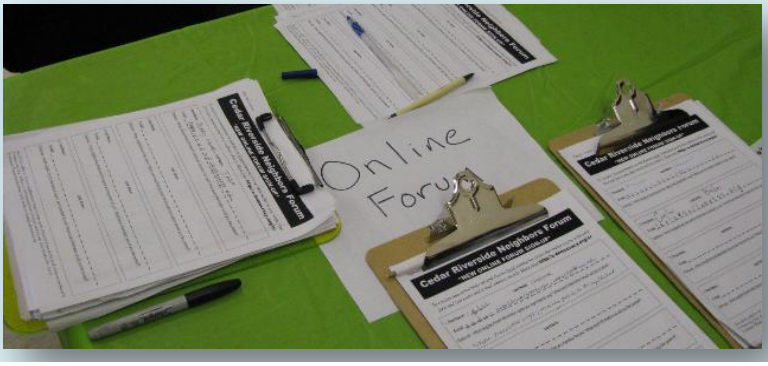
By contrast, outreach staff and volunteers found that the best way to reach people is face-to-face and using a paper signup sheet. Also key to any successful approach is time and place:

- I was doing first-hand contact with community members. That was very effective because it allowed a conversation to start and I could bring it into a discussion of an online community.
- I'd say to people, this is a community forum that's a place for people to learn about community issues and find out about what's going on.
- I have no idea how effective it was to post flyers in the Frogtown neighborhood. What I did have sometimes, however, were conversations with people as I was posting the flyers in businesses along University [Avenue]; for example, someone asking about it and then saying, yeah, my mom is always on that.

Community and political events, gatherings, and activities presented great opportunities for organized outreach, and can have even more impact when done transparently and in partnership with the organizers.

- In Cedar-Riverside the key event for us has been the annual multicultural dinner. Of the 300+ members on the forum about 110 of them were signed up at one of the last three dinners. They brought us dozens of teenage and young adult East Africans, many East African women, and most recently it brought us an older Vietnamese gentleman…who perhaps can help us bridge into the 1970s/1980s communities.
- For the most recent multicultural event we stepped up our involvement a lot with a special table and a speech by our [E-Democracy] outreach staff that was translated into different languages – we felt much more "embraced" by the community.

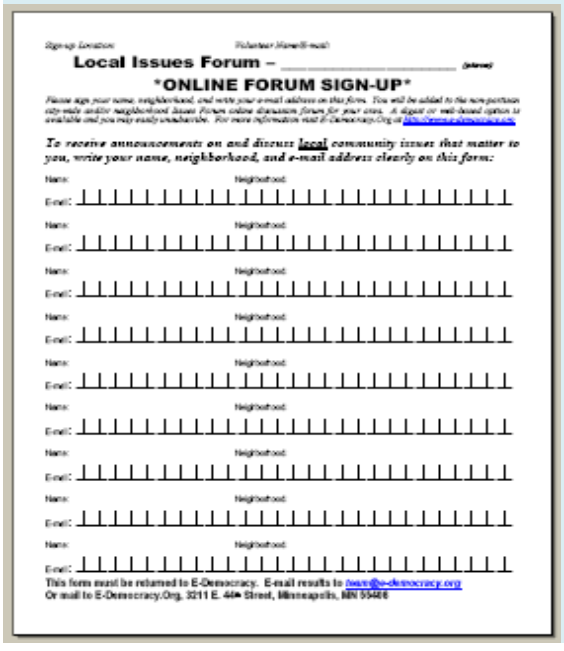
***Figure 9*: Outreach staff and volunteers signed up forum participants at community events**



4.2 Building Relationships through Community Organizing

It became clear early in this work that engaging people with the local issues forums required just the same kind of work as is required to engage people in *any* community effort: Taking the time and making the effort to build authentic and trusting relationships.

***Figure 10*: Sign-up sheet**
Up to 25% of email addresses can be illegible when using straight lines. Sign-up forms with separate spaces for each letter significantly improve legibility.


Local Issues Forum – _____

ONLINE FORUM SIGN-UP

To receive announcements on and discuss local community issues that matter to you, write your name, neighborhood, and e-mail address clearly on this form:

Name: Neighborhood:
Email:

This form must be returned to E-Democracy. E-mail results to
Or mail to E-Democracy.Org, 3211 E. 44th Street, Minneapolis, MN 55406

Starting in early 2010, outreach staff began building on the relationships they already had with neighbors, businesses, and community organizations. They continued to nurture those connections through active listening and partnership, asking others what they wanted and needed in an online communications vehicle and trying to connect this to what was available on the forum.

- In many cases I already had relationships with people and organizations who they knew I wouldn't sign up for something unless it was a good thing. Those relationships helped me get in the door and build trust with people around the issues forum. I really worked hard to sell E-Democracy as something useful and important to the community. A new Hmong forum participant explained it this way: "For something like this, I would never have joined or posted if you hadn't told me about it; I wouldn't trust it. I only participated because I knew you and you trusted this website, so then I trusted it too."

There was overwhelming appreciation of in-person outreach as being very, very effective. Outreach staff noted that many strategies have been tried to bring together communities of color but in-person is so much more personal.

- To have the in-person conversation with another person who knows about the forum is effective because it gives it a more human feeling – like I really am talking to someone vs. someone who goes online because they have nothing better to do. This is about big ideas and people who want to make a change in their community. That's why it's very important to have the in-person outreach.
- I also met with people one-on-one to find out about what they are working on and tell them about what E-Democracy is doing. Once I found common ground we could discuss how E-Democracy could be helpful to them, such as to inform people about events and so on.

***Figure 11**: Outreach staff participated in community events and signed up people for the forums*

4.3 Building Name Recognition

In both Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown, a key strategy was for outreach staff to become known in the neighborhood as *associated with* E-Democracy. Staff focused on building relationships initially with new immigrant business owners and expanded fairly quickly to community and opinion leaders from various sectors.

- **Frogtown:** Being out in the community so people can see you as a real person working for E-Democracy – someone who believes in and supports E-Democracy; it's not even only about talking to people – sometimes it's just about being someplace more than once, each time clearly representing E-Democracy. When I went to a District Council meeting, for example, during the introductions I would introduce myself as the E-Democracy outreach leader.
- **Cedar-Riverside:** I also attended a lot of events to get myself known, even if the entire event was in some language I didn't know – just to meet people and talk about E-Democracy.
- **Frogtown:** For my outreach I was generally going to public places where different kinds of people gathered – like the library or the Hmongtown market.
- **Cedar-Riverside:** We also met with institutional and organizational leaders, such as representatives from colleges right in the neighborhood and the organizer of the community gardens; some weren't necessarily from targeted outreach groups but they were people who had some pulse on what's going on the neighborhood.
- **Cedar-Riverside:** Over several months I met with community activists, health care advocates, university employees, students, and residents. I walked from store to store discovering a [Somali]

***Figure 12**: Community events were ideal places to offer people the opportunity to sign up for an issues forum*

mall I did not know existed. I attended neighborhood meetings, neighborhood safety meetings, and community events. I attended meetings of the business association, (city) Neighborhood Revitalization Program, West Bank Coalition, Youth Council, and others. I spent time at the Brian Coyle Center where I got further acquainted with community organizers. Every Tuesday, I would buy my vegetables from the small farmers market. These opportunities allowed me an almost-insider's look into the community.

4.4 Cross-pollinating: Forum-Community Connections

As the project progressed, outreach staff began to more directly engage community members by leveraging connections through or with the forum itself. One of the best strategies was to combine in-person and online connections to build critical relationships.

- **Cedar-Riverside:** When Brian Noy posted on the forum about the low sales at the Brian Coyle Center's farmers market, I met with him to see how he could best promote it. He was creative in his postings by featuring a weekly vegetarian recipe. However, the reality was that the people who needed to see it most were not accessing it. His best approach, it turned out, was speaking to community organizers housed at the Brian Coyle Center who I introduced him to, who would in turn communicate to their different constituencies.

***Figure 13*: Cedar-Riverside, Brian Coyle Center farmers' market.**
Photo by Julia Nekessa Opoti, posted on the E-Democracy.org blog

When posting her reflections to the E-Democracy blog,[12] Marny Xiong wrote about building sincere relationships with local residents: "Residents are the life blood of this forum. They are our volunteer forum managers and most active posters – rightly so, as much of what happens in a neighborhood will be felt by those living in it. This year, we spoke with some of our most active resident participants, as well as with those who did not post as frequently or ever. By actively participating in the affairs of the neighborhood – attending events and meetings and conducting one-on-one outreach – we learned about the communications holes that neighbors felt existed. Some forum members told us that if it had not been for our presence in the neighborhood, they would not have known about the forum, nor would they have trusted the forum enough to participate on it. In other words, because people saw us in the neighborhood, they lent us greater credibility."

4.5 Creating Support Systems for Outreach Staff

Inherent to engaging a team of outreach staff is setting up support systems from initial training to team meetings and ongoing support. Start-up training focused on the purposes of neighborhood-level online forums and the technical aspects of how they worked, the complementary role of our local volunteers

12 Lee, Boa, "Four Frogtown Lessons – Trust, Usability, Diversity, Potential," E-Democracy.org Project Blog, http://blog.e-democracy.org/?s=Residents+are+the+life+blood+of+this+forum, 25 January 2011.

who serve as forum managers, and our internal process for gathering paper-based registrations, entering the data, confirming, and finally adding them to online forum. We encouraged team members to monitor other of our all-volunteer forums that served urban middle-income neighborhoods with varying amounts of racial/ethnic/linguistic diversity, to get a better of sense of how forums are or could be used in their neighborhoods.

Training E-Democracy outreach staff and volunteers to gather and share real-world examples of forum value and relevance was key when communicating with potential members. Only a few people will excitedly join after simply being asked, "Would you like to sign-up for a neighborhood online forum?" Most people need to hear how this might be relevant to them or worry about gimmicks or scams. Ensuring outreach staff and volunteers have specific examples to share allowed them to connect with prospective forum members. Learning about or promoting great community events, asking for a local business recommendation, or raising your voice about local issues like a new light rail line are examples of how to help people see forums as places to learn as well as have a say in the future of their own community.

Our 2010 work focused more on "content engagement" than on field recruiting, and we also assumed limited resources in order to ensure sustainability for this project and viability for future community forums. We thus sought contract staff who could spend an average of just an hour a day to help "animate" forum conversations particularly among new forum members who were of color, in poverty, or new immigrants.[13] The community outreach leads we found for Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown had journalism backgrounds that helped them leverage community discussions to spur forum conversations, and listen strategically for community information and news that they then shared.

E-Democracy's executive director also convened biweekly team conference calls among lead staff and volunteers for everyone to provide an update, share what was going well, and get help on what wasn't. They also used this time to plan for or adjust upcoming activities.

Outreach staff also found it invaluable to create tools to support ongoing activities, such as templates for community event flyers and handouts (http://e-democracy.org/print), checklists of supplies and materials for tabling at events, and so forth.

LEARNING

Online promotion is insufficient for inclusive recruitment. Going into the community – not expecting the community to come to you – is essential.

4.6 Learnings

Our lead outreach staff and volunteers highlighted a variety of important learnings:

- The fact that our forums are online doesn't change how people make decisions to participate – or not. Face-to-face connections, paper sign-up sheets, and a personal approach are by far the most successful.
- Building trust is essential. Knowing that "someone like me" is on the forum helps a lot. Personal invitations and direct support help people get started.

[13] *While we initially hoped to find staff who were good at both in-person field recruitment and generating community exchanges among diverse forum members, our experience has been that these are very different skill sets and interests rarely found in a single person. The job descriptions we used in 2010 and 2011 are at http://pages.e-democracy.org/Community_Outreach_and_Information_Leaders and http://pages.e-democracy.org/Community_Outreach_Leaders_and_Volunteers.*

- Understanding people's needs and then helping them find ways for those needs to be addressed through the forum smoothes the path for their participation and continued involvement.
- Partnering with respected neighbors and event organizers creates opportunities to participate in community activities and sign people up for the forums.
- Being able to discuss the forum with cultural awareness and in the community member's home language is essential.
- In high-immigrant, racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods one outreach staff person cannot reach all communities. Building – and supporting – an active, diverse forum base will increase capacity and forum sustainability.

> ***It could be better. It could always be better. Cedar-Riverside is very diverse, so more voices are needed on the forum.***
> ***—Julia Nekessa Opoti, Cedar-Riverside Forum outreach staff***

One outreach staff member also recommended that E-Democracy give staff more information about the impact of their recruitment efforts[14], and others noted that it would be beneficial to have outreach staff do some of the new member follow-up for those they recruited so they could continue building on the positive relationships they established.

Issues around cultures, home language, race, and ethnicity are central to all of these discussions, whether around who's doing the outreach to whom, who posts and who doesn't, and the content of the posts. At minimum, everyone involved in outreach or formal forum leadership must be able to demonstrate cultural awareness and cultural proficiency, and continually evolve on both fronts along with the communities they serve.

14 Marny Xiong

5 Program Outcome: Increase Forum Size, Diversity, Energy, and Community-building Potential

Guiding Questions

- How successfully did E-Democracy:
  - Recruit more participants?
  - Deepen the diversity of participants on the forums?
  - Expand and deepen the diversity of forum posts?
- In what ways did E-Democracy "animate" the diversity in the forums?
- In what ways do posts and posters on the forums display a sense of community belonging, as well as government, institutional, and community accountability?

> ***Participation is essential for the vibrancy and posterity of the forum. A key factor is making sure that people understand that the forum's diversity is only as rich as its member participation.***
> ***—Julia Nekessa Opoti, Cedar-Riverside Forum outreach staff***

5.1 Building Forum Size and Capacity

5.1.1 Forum Size

As shown on the graph below, both forums have grown significantly due to explicit outreach, but the processes and timing were different.

A small grant from the Minneapolis Foundation funded initial outreach to **Cedar-Riverside** communities of color and new immigrants in 2008-09. That covered developing forum membership to the minimum opening number of 100[15] when the forum launched in January 2009, and building it to a membership of 205 by January 2010. More strategic and targeted outreach in 2010 supported by this Ford Foundation grant boosted Cedar-Riverside forum membership at an even faster rate, reaching 344 by January 2011. Growth supported by the same funding source but outside the scope of this evaluation resulted in a Cedar-Riverside membership of 549 by December 2011.

A small grant from the Knight Foundation funded outreach to communities of color and new immigrants in **Frogtown** in summer 2009. In this case, however, E-Democracy delayed the start of this forum well beyond the minimum number of 100 members, waiting for a much larger number of participants to ensure both a strong start and longer-term sustainability. Frogtown launched in September 2009 with 269 participants.

Given the higher startup numbers in Frogtown, Ford Foundation funding continued to increase membership but focused more on deepening content. Frogtown membership continued to be strong in 2010, growing to 305 by the end of that year. Growth supported by the same funding source but outside the scope of this evaluation resulted in Frogtown membership of 489 by December 2011.

[15] *E-Democracy requires 100 members before a forum is opened with a facilitated round of forum introductions. The goal is to get 20% of the members to introduce themselves at the beginning to humanize the online space and develop a collective sense that the members themselves are the ones who will contribute the most value to the online exchange. Forum efforts are often initiated when a volunteer steps up as the Forum Manager for their neighborhood. Our funded, active online and in-person outreach during the recruitment phase meant that within a few months volunteers could reach the 100 members needed to open. Without active and supported outreach, memberships may trickle in over a year or more and may not reach 100 before the effort runs out of steam.*

5.1.2 Forum Capacity

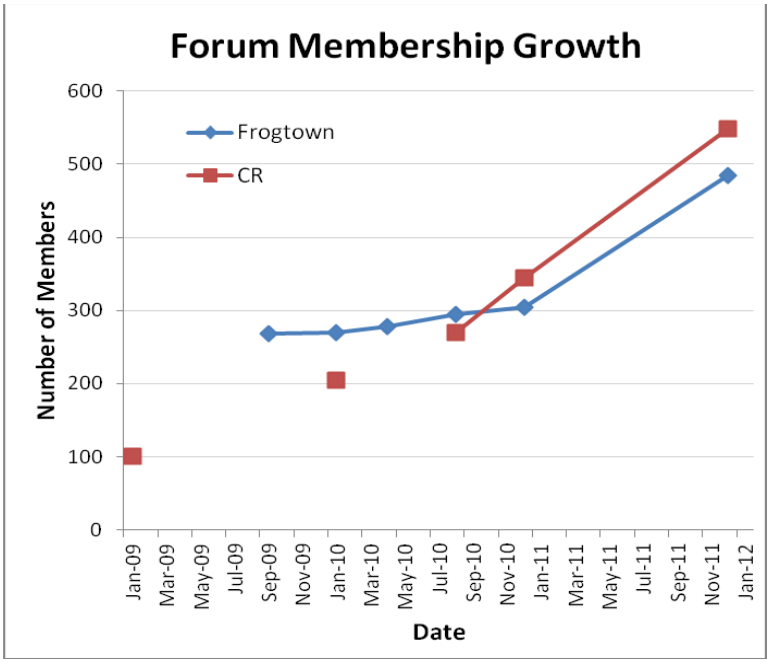
Outreach staff[16] in Cedar-Riverside noted that moving to the "next level" has two dimensions: Getting up to a certain number of people (400, for example) as well as building the level of engaged dialogue that we see on some of the other forums where there's much more of a "community dynamic" on the forum. Another[17] highlighted further challenges around perceptions of the Internet as a community space: E-Democracy creates space for people to talk about neighborhood issues [but] we have to understand that telling people to come on the Internet when they don't see the Internet as "a space" isn't necessarily the right thing to do.

***Figure 14*:Forum membership growth**

While this evaluation is for 2010 only, the graph below shows longer-term membership data from the beginning of each forum – Cedar-Riverside in January 2009 and Frogtown in September 2009.

Growth for the two forums is comparable in rate and trend in spite of Cedar-Riverside following the more "traditional" E-Democracy approach of opening a forum with 100 members and Frogtown first building over 250 members in order to open with a much stronger base.

Differences do emerge, however, when looking at thread initiation and the impact of individual posters, as discussed below.



A Cedar-Riverside staff member[18] considers E-Democracy uniquely positioned to engage people: "Unlike many organizations, the forum doesn't want anything from the community – not in the literal sense anyway." She believes that participation is key for the vibrancy and posterity of the forum, and helping *members* understand that the forum's diversity is only as rich as its member participation. To support that she also reminded us all, "If the conversation doesn't come from people in the community, it's more like a museum."

Frogtown outreach staff[19] also examined the broader size and capacity questions, with one asking, "How do we know when a forum is ready to stand alone without paid outreach people?" Her own answer was multifold: "When there are a lot of new members who are *not* explicitly recruited by the outreach coordinator, a higher number of posts, and a more diverse range of posts." And she was equally clear about the forum's current status: "Frogtown isn't there yet."

Staff and Forum Managers on both forums also struggled with the interconnection of various measures: Numbers of posters, types or categories of posters (outreach staff, community organizers/organizations, businesses, residents, elected officials, etc.), types or diversity of posts including how much "traction" threads get, and so forth.

16 Ben Marcy
17 Julia Nekessa Opoti
18 Julia Nekessa Opoti
19 Boa Lee

- Cedar-Riverside: I gathered emails where I could, but haven't seen an increase in members posting new content or responding to forum topics. However, forum statistics show that readership is steadily increasing. I also found that many of the community organizers are already registered on the forum, but only lurk [read but do not post].
- Frogtown: How can we continue to build capacity? I think there's a group of people who were involved right before the forum launched but they weren't further engaged. We could maintain this group to champion the forum, teach and encourage others to get involved, model involvement – it's all about capacity building. Cedar-Riverside outreach staff found the same kind of thing with forum members who were initially willing to promote the forum, but as they continued to be very active in community issues this became much less of a priority.
- Cedar-Riverside: Moving beyond a service function of posting things and making it more of a community dialogue. Examine what moves people to community action – which can be both positive and negative.
- It is essential to build local volunteer capacity to support transferring forum-building from a paid staff person to volunteers.

***Figure 15*: From a Frogtown forum post, students practice balance as part of a "Get Healthy!" initiative at Jackson Elementary School**

Cedar-Riverside outreach staff found very different styles of communications and a lot of back-channel discussions via private email between forum members. One of the objectives was to have the forum grow within the community and be seen as a free and easy way to communicate. "If we don't do this, people who should be using this kind of tool to communicate won't do so. And we want people to see this as a tool to communicate *within* their 'niche community' and also across different communities."[20] An active forum participant[21] reflected, "Somalis help each other and talk on other online forums, but they do not have a feeling of belonging to join the forum." At the same time, another outreach staff[22] reminded us, "With a neighborhood like Cedar-Riverside the history is about turf, and whose is whose."

Issues around building forum capacity also intersect with culture and race as discussed further below. As one Cedar-Riverside forum member[23] reflected, "Segregation – whether cultural or economic – contributes to the silence, and the lack of sense of community." And another participant[24] suggested that "The anti-white comments from some of the users might discourage participation."

5.1.3 Building Membership through Social Media and Other Online Spaces

E-Democracy executive director Steven Clift noted the contrast between our forums and Facebook and other online spaces including newspaper comment sections: "People are tired of being continually attacked in online public spaces, particularly local newspaper websites where 'go home' is too common

20 Steven Clift
21 Mustafa Adam
22 Ben Marcy
23 Mustafa Adam
24 Anonymous

in online responses to articles referencing immigrant communities. That kind of online hostility makes prospective members of our forums fear our more integrated online public spaces."

"At the same time," Clift continued, "E-Democracy has to more actively interface with private life in various forms. If an issue resonates enough for people to share it on Facebook and talk with friends about it, it supports E-Democracy's democratic mission and can result in more people joining the forum. We are also experimenting with different strategies and approaches to share Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown content via Facebook pages, and have over 1,000 people who 'like' both our forums. Most of these are young and teenage women, many of whom responded to Facebook ads, who may become forum members as they get older." Similar desires for more robust functionality and interfacing on E-Democracy forums were shared by some forum participants, although not explored further as part of this evaluation.

At least one Cedar-Riverside forum participant who actually works in youth development was skeptical about such a shift, however, if Facebook is already meeting some people's needs: "Other young people might be open to E-Democracy on Facebook, but I doubt it because they have already created their own Facebook communities."[25] Another noted that she felt safer sharing her thoughts on her Facebook page because it was limited to only her friends – her views weren't exposed to others who might disapprove or use it against her. Similarly, a regular Cedar-Riverside poster reminded us that "People have different agendas and biases on race and stereotypes of immigrants – people already have their mind made up. I would rather generate discussion on my own Facebook where I actually *know* the people I'm talking with online."[26]

Cedar-Riverside outreach staff[27] also noted a University of Minnesota online study looking at how young immigrants are interacting on Facebook. She mentioned Facebook pages with names like "Somalis in Minnesota" or "Put your hands up if you're Somali," or "If you live in Cedar-Riverside Plaza join this group." She also noted a fascinating Facebook conversation in which kids were asking about which is more authentic, someone who speaks our language or who dresses a certain way, or not? They were grappling with these identity issues with their Facebook friends."

> ***Facebook and E-Democracy are very different spaces. A lot of these groups aren't private but there's a sense they are their group and this is their space – and the forum is not their space.***
> ***– Julia Nekessa Opoti, Cedar-Riverside Forum outreach staff***

The same outreach worker also has concerns, however, that social media "allow you create your own reality, like you do when you visit only certain websites – which sometimes centers on culture, race, etc. Now children of immigrants can have relationships with many other types of people, but with some of the social media you can hold on to particular identities more than ever before – that's not necessarily a negative thing except when it becomes isolationist." And both staff and forum participants note that E-Democracy's forums aren't like that.

While Facebook connections for E-Democracy are essential to demonstrate our presence and impact in multiple online environments, staff noted that it's also very difficult to communicate to people in other parts of the country the nuances between Facebook and our forums. Being there does give us access to other people, however, and can help make our lessons relevant to people who want to use other mechanisms.

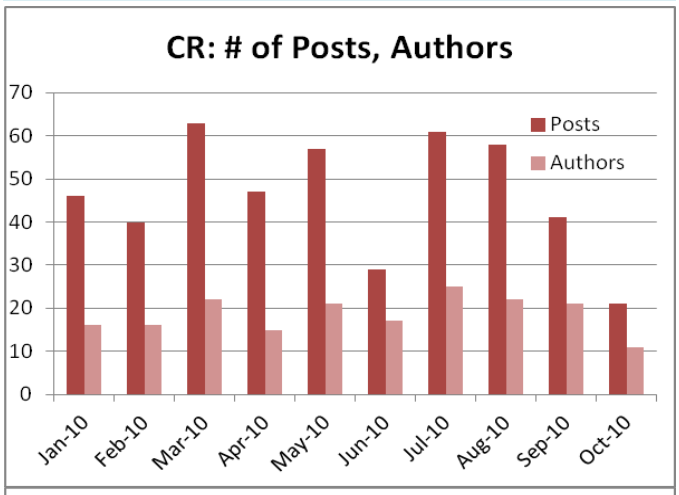
---

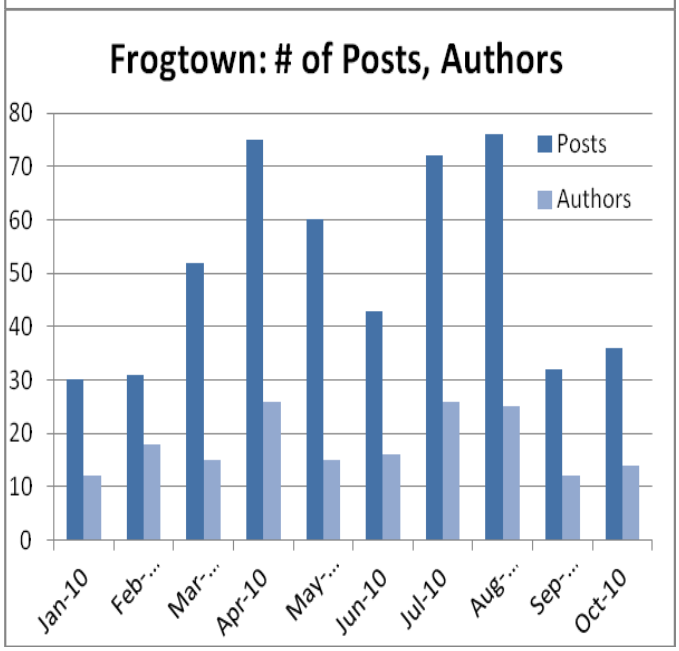
[25] Salmah Hussein
26 Salmah Hussein
27 Julia Nekessa Opoti

5.2 Engaging Participants and Supporting Participation

It was important in both Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown to directly and explicitly support and encourage people to post, which required strategies that varied by person and situation. In some cases that meant helping people understand the mechanics of posting. Others, including organizations and elected officials, needed reminders to use the forum to communicate with community members. Some wanted help crafting their post to make the desired point or to use the most effective language. And in some cases it simply meant having the outreach staff or forum manager politely decline to continue posting items *for* others and instead help them do so themselves.

***Figure 16*: Posts, authors**
These charts show the generally consistent proportion of author numbers to post numbers on each of the forums, although the numbers for both were higher in Frogtown for 2010.





- When people sent me notes about things, instead of posting it for them sometimes I'd encourage them to post it to the forum themselves.
- Broadly, I have found that maybe one out of three times that I encourage people to post that they do so – it makes a difference if you invite and encourage people to post.
- Sometimes I posted information about what was going on in the neighborhood; I also met with lots of people and encouraged them to do those same kinds of posts.
- I also "seeded" topics so people could see what they could talk about.
- Staff and forum members frequently send private emails to less frequent posters thanking them for posting and encouraging them to continue participating; this can be especially valuable for new or reluctant posters regardless of the reason. Staff have also found it helpful to encourage people to post answers they received privately to questions posted on the forum.
- There are people who want to be part of the forum but they won't if they aren't asked to join or continue to be involved; it means a lot to be invited to participate, and in doing so they will want to talk about it and share it with others.
- I had more individual, in-person conversations prodding or encouraging them to post if they have something to say.
- If people were having a meeting about something happening in the neighborhood, I could use the forum to invite others who wouldn't otherwise have been connected with this effort or involved in the neighborhood.

- Sometimes at community gatherings I would follow up with some of the E-Democracy posters who were there, encouraging them to post or discussing posts with them.

Yet even the expectation of outreach staff to launch threads on a forum and explicitly encourage participation sometimes backfired…but also created learning opportunities:

- When I started a thread by providing initial information then posting questions, that in itself may have stopped or intimidated some people from posting – those who were not comfortable with their own writing may have felt I set such a high bar that it prevented their engaging.[28]

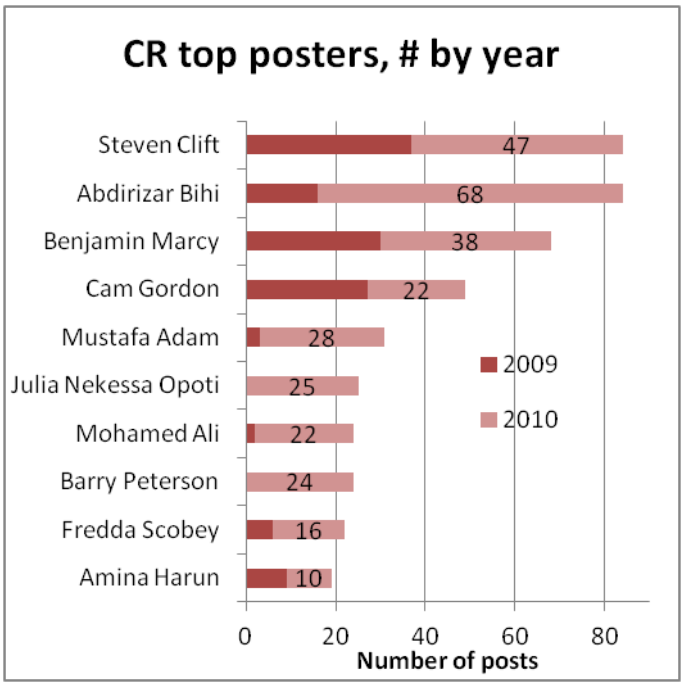
***Figure 17*: Top posters**

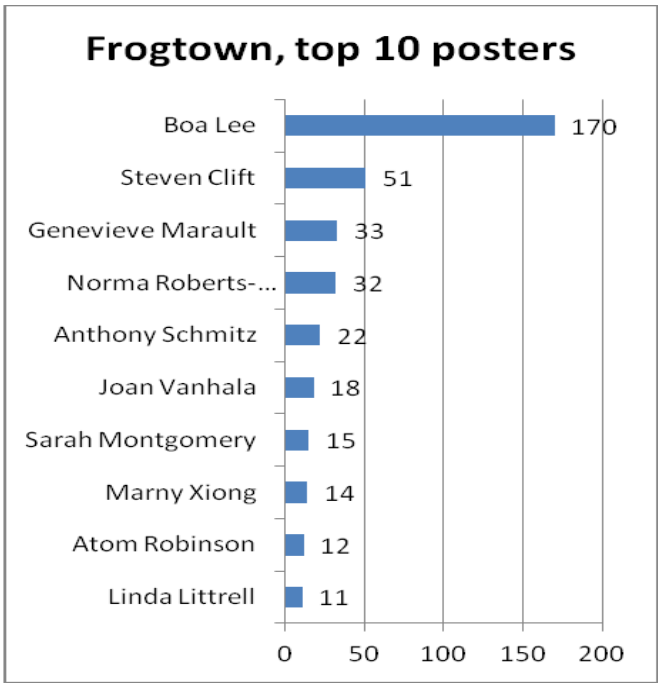
The graphs below showing top posters in the two forums reflect the different designs and forum dynamics.

For the Cedar-Riverside top poster posting frequency for both 2009 and 2010, you can see the much higher numbers for executive director Steven Clift in 2009 compared to others, and then in 2010 the emergence of other strong posters – including outreach staff Julia Nekessa Opoti.

In Frogtown with only 2010 data, staff member Boa Lee was charged with seeding the forum with new threads and posts so her overwhelming numbers are logical, as are those by Steven Clift.

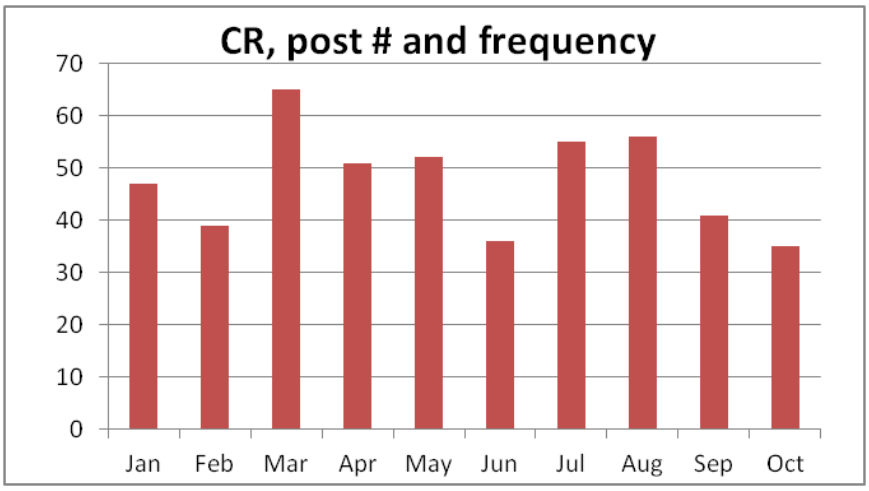
In both cases it is important to see that in 2010 significant numbers of non-staff members were strong posters.

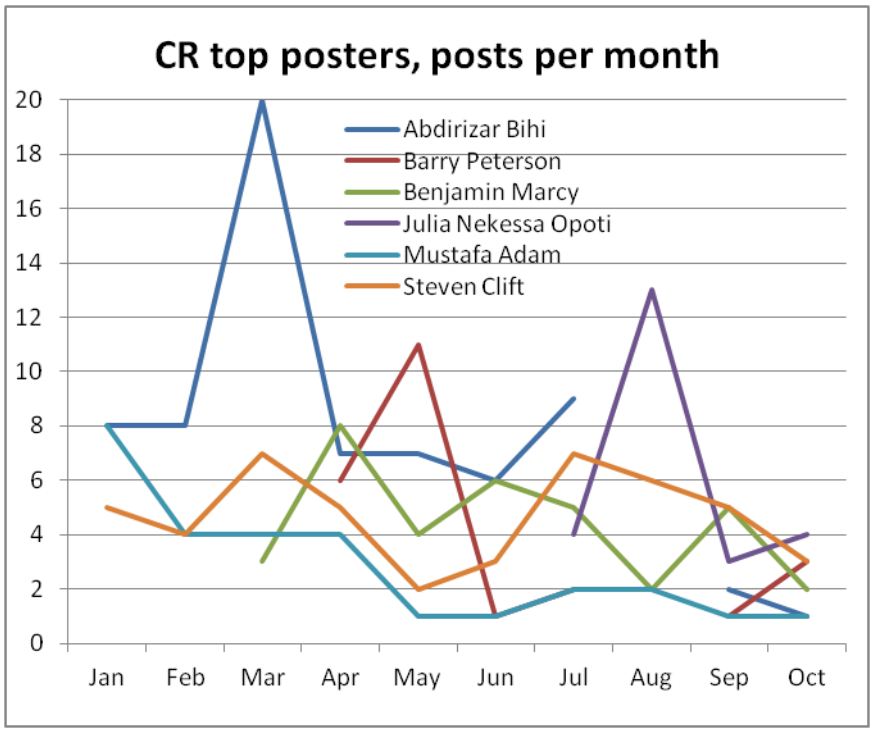




28 Boa Lee

1.1.1 Size, Engagement, and Dynamism





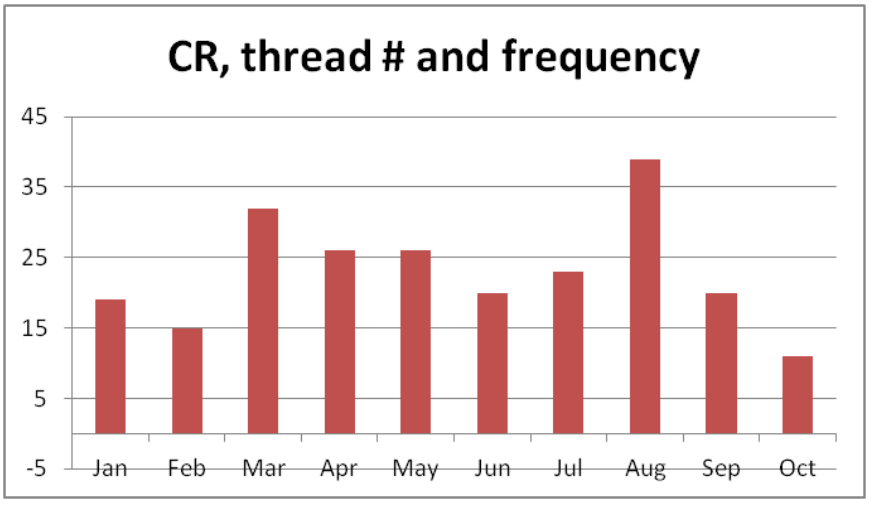


***Figure 18*: Cedar-Riverside post and thread numbers and frequency**

The top graph shows post numbers and frequency for all 2010 Cedar-Riverside posts.

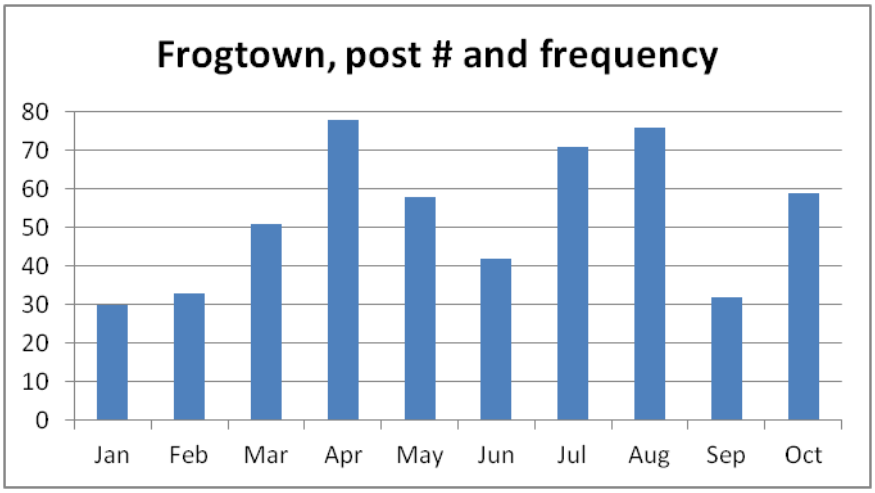
In the middle are comparable data for the top posters on the forum.

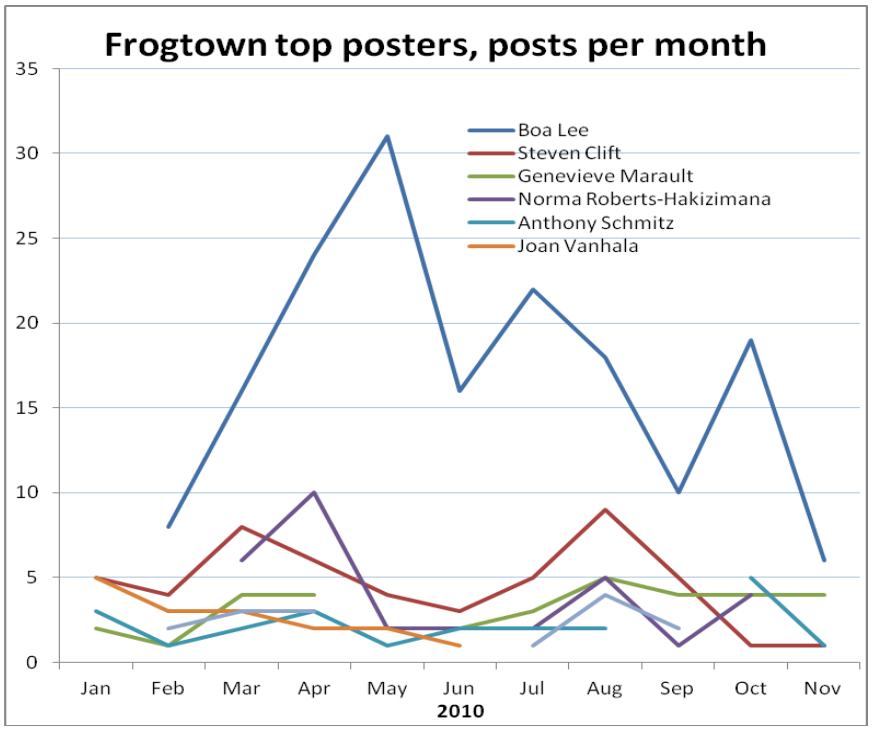
The bottom graph shows thread numbers and frequency.

Spikes in individual and forum-wide posts – and threads – on this and most E-Democracy forums are typically related to "hot" community issues.

While the top Cedar-Riverside posters certainly contributed significantly to the overall numbers, it is clear that many others were also actively posting.

The graphs also show that in months such as March and August with high numbers of forum and individual posts, in Cedar-Riverside we did not see a corresponding drop in the number of threads, suggesting that there wasn't excessive domination of the forum activity or content –i.e., there was robust and varied participation and dialogue.





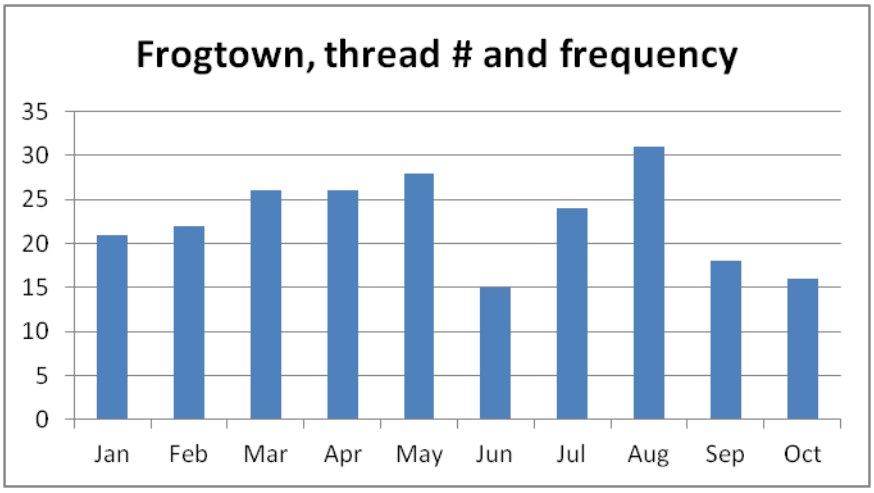


***Figure 19*: Frogtown post and thread numbers and frequency**

The top graph shows post numbers and frequency for all 2010 Frogtown posts.

In the middle are comparable data for the top 6 posters on the forum.

The bottom graph shows thread numbers and frequency.

Spikes in individual and forum-wide posts – and threads – on this and most E-Democracy forums are typically related to "hot" community issues.

The top Frogtown posters are clearly – and intentionally – led by E-Democracy staff member Boa Lee, who was explicitly tasked with creating posts to "seed" member participation and then support it.

As the graphs show, the top posters certainly contributed to the overall numbers, but even more clearly than in Cedar-Riverside, many other forum members were actively posting and starting their own threads; see further discussion of thread initiation below.

The graphs also show a good balance between numbers of posts and numbers of new threads, suggesting there was robust and varied participation and dialogue.

***Figure 20*: Top thread initiators**

One measure of forum energy or dynamism is the number of threads initiated. The graphs below show the top 10 thread starters in each forum. Note the scale difference, with E-Democracy staff member Boa Lee in Frogtown with double the number of the top thread starter in Cedar-Riverside. Starting threads and encouraging and supporting posts was explicitly Boa's job on that forum, while there was no comparable person on the Cedar-Riverside forum.

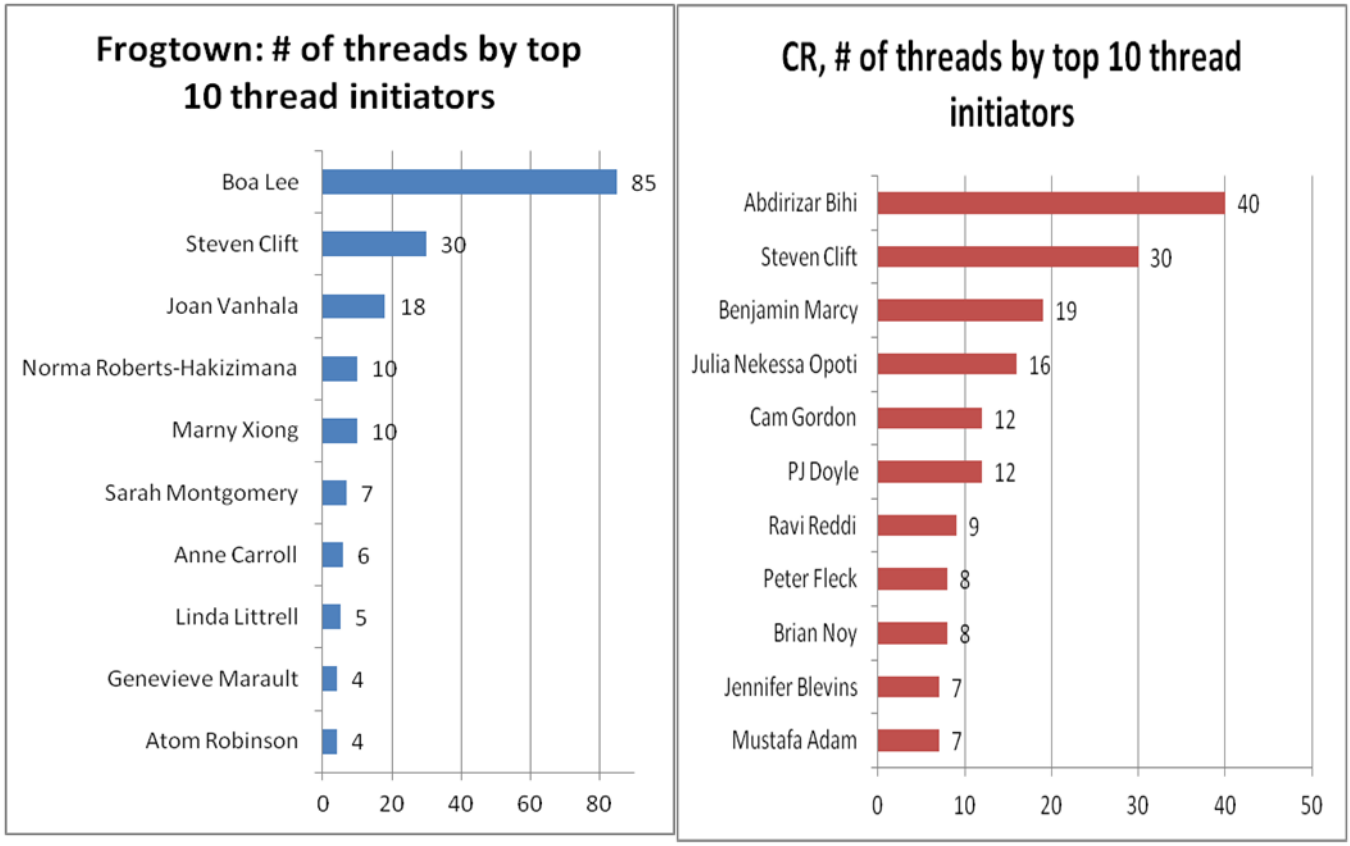
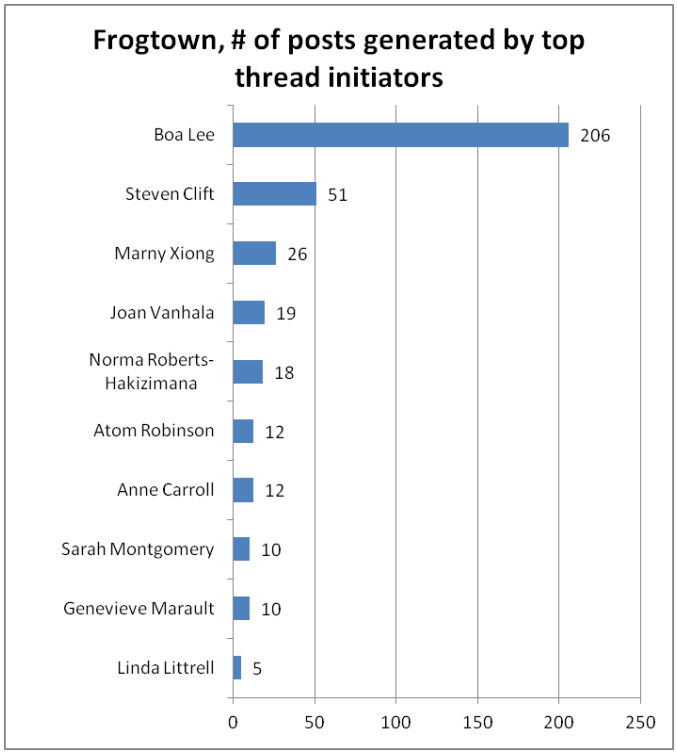


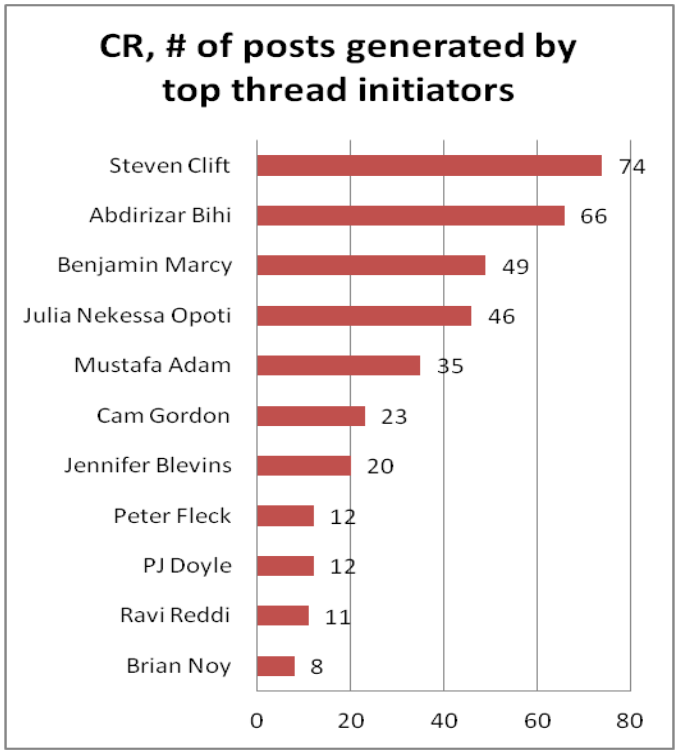
***Figure 21:* Number of posts generated by top thread initiators**

The graphs below examine one aspect of forum dynamism – the number of posts generated as a result of a new thread. These show the people on each forum who have begun the highest number of threads, and the number of posts generated as a result.

In Frogtown, with 206 posts generated as a result of E-Democracy staff member Boa Lee starting threads, this clearly shows the impact that intentional effort to stimulate and support active member participation and posts. Also note that other top thread-starters' topics also generated a fairly high number of posts. And even though several of the top thread starters are tied to E-Democracy (Clift, Xiong, Robinson, and Carroll), none beyond Boa were tasked with actively posting.

In Cedar-Riverside, note the significant difference in the number of posts generated by even these top thread starters. Here also, four of the top five thread initiators (all but Bihi) are tied to E-Democracy, but none was explicitly charged with either starting threads or stimulating participation. By contrast with Frogtown, after those top five there is a significant drop-off in the number of posts generated by these top thread-starters.





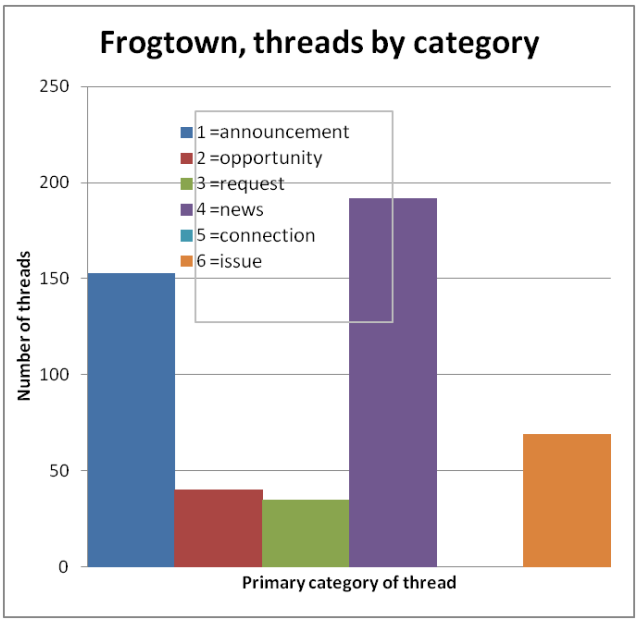
5.3 Content Diversity

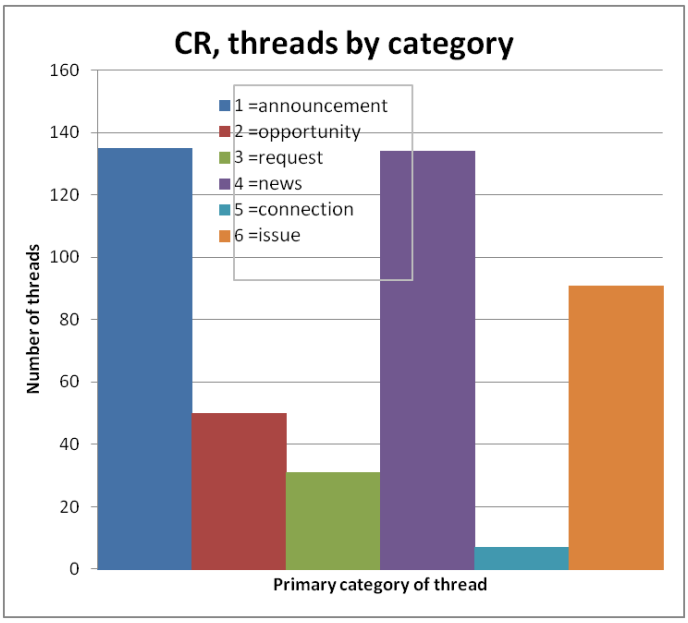
One of E-Democracy's areas of interest was the "diversity" of the posts themselves. To get at this we looked at both simple data analysis and the perspectives of our staff and forum participants. For the analysis we qualitatively categorized Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside posts in 2010 by the following:

1 = Announcement, about an event or activity
2 = Opportunity, something to do, see, or get
3 = Request for assistance, participation
4 = News
5 = Whether the post included an explicit connection to the community; this was not whether it fell within the parameters of the forum's charter, but rather it made additional *meaning* of the post related to the community; this was intended to be used as both a primary and a secondary category, but in fact was rarely identified as primary
6 = Tangible or specific issues of some import or magnitude in that community

The Cedar-Riverside volunteer Forum Manager[29] noted his perception of forum posts: "We have lots of announcement posts and some major issues posts/threads, but we lack much in the middle; there have been a few remembrances, anecdotes, group efforts…. It's more mission-driven, survival-oriented, big stuff…but less in the middle." He went on to note that E-Democracy executive director Steven Clift "does more of that but people don't usually jump in," and concluded that he as an active volunteer "could do more to start conversations about what's going on in the community."

***Figure 22*: Threads by content category (content diversity)**
While there is significant content diversity on both forums, note that Cedar-Riverside has higher numbers of announcements and opportunities – which by their nature are less likely to generate follow-up posts of any kind. Contrast the many more news items in Frogtown, often by E-Democracy staff member Boa Lee, within which she posed specific questions to elicit further posts.



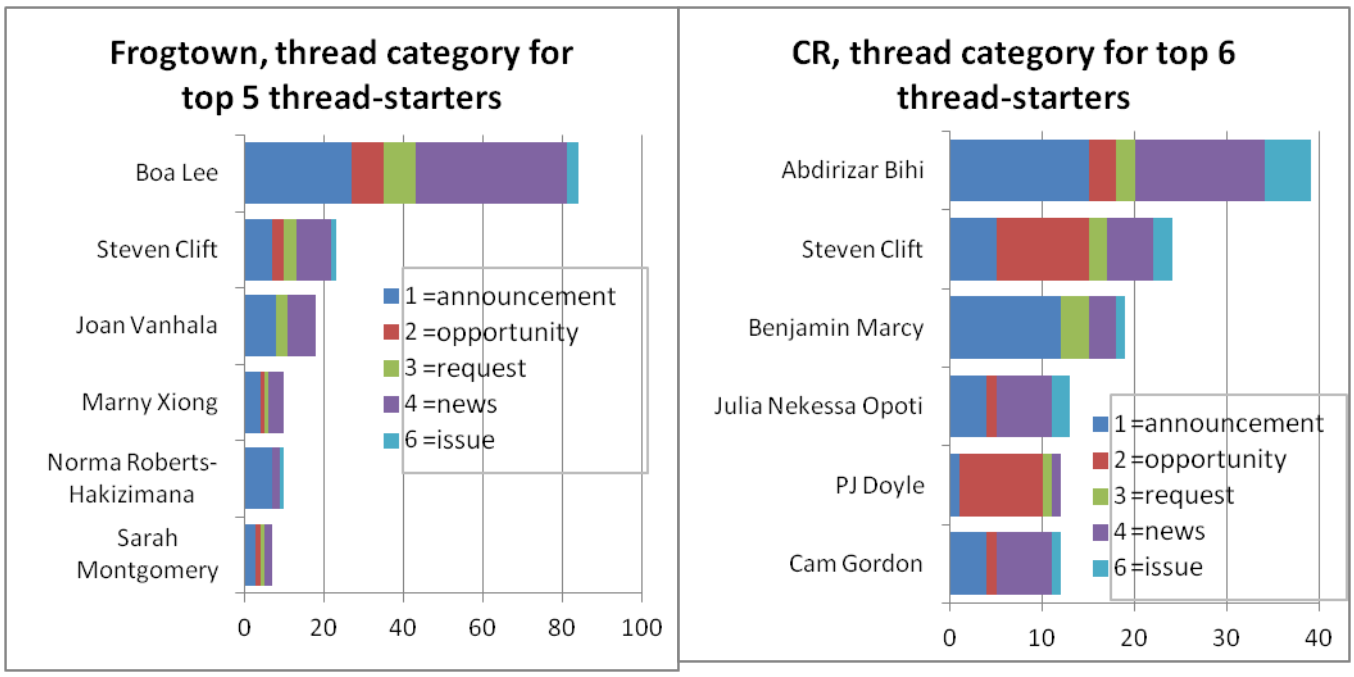


29 *Ben Marcy*

***Figure 23*: Thread content category (content diversity) for top thread starters**

These graphs are for the top thread starters on each forum, showing the content category as a proportion of all their thread-starting posts. (Note the scale differences, given the much higher number by Boa Lee.)

The previous graphs have shown the significant volume and impact difference when someone is intentionally starting threads, posting in response to others' threads, and encouraging participation. What is interesting here is that on a proportional basis, the content diversity of the threads for the top 5 thread-starters in each forum is not dramatically different – both remain heavy on announcements and news, but with a very healthy mix of other categories.



In Frogtown where the community and forum members include fewer first-generation adult immigrants than in Cedar-Riverside, one E-Democracy outreach staff member noted the contrast with other E-Democracy forums: Few Frogtown forum members or groups (outside of E-Democracy) posted news or announcements about community events and activities. Yet when forum members do make such posts, not everyone is happy; one regular poster[30] bemoaned the duplicative nature of some announcements, especially for people who are active in the community, saying, "We get bombarded sometimes by the same announcement of a community meeting when we are already on a professional's listserv and then they post it on the forum."

In Cedar-Riverside an outreach staff[31] member observed that the bulk of the posts are announcements that don't generate a response or discussion.

Unique to Cedar-Riverside are underlying demographics that shape the forum, with "still lots of focus on what's happening in Somalia." Outreach staff[32] reflected, "That's another challenge of the forum with its specific [neighborhood] focus – people may not care as much about what's happening in the neighborhood compared to what's happening in Somalia. And when things do come up on the forum about Somalia it may turn off others –as if it's [exclusively] a Somali forum."

30 Genevieve Marault
31 Ben Marcy
32 Ben Marcy

The same forum member expressed a similar concern about political races and in that case made a further point about a desire to have more robust discussions: "When it came to coverage of the [Minnesota House district] 65A [special election] legislative race, I felt we were getting the same kind of thing from the candidates – the same message and a lot of people posting who were playing nice but no one who was really asking the kinds of questions voters might have been wondering." Her solution was to stimulate conversation: "Sometimes I deliberately post something I know will go against what someone (even the original poster) is saying or thinking just to play devil's advocate so we can remember there are different perspectives. I don't always believe in the opinions I post but there should be voices of dissent on the forum too and not just a whole bunch of people who all think alike. Let's get a well-rounded discussion going!"

> ***Not all kinds of content variations are appealing: "I am on some of the other [non-E-Democracy] forums…and sometimes people are just flaming others on there so I don't even bother reading through those."***
> ***—Mai Vang, Frogtown forum participant***

Another Frogtown poster and active community member[33] liked the issues-orientation of some posts, but also found some surprises: "The kinds of issues that could be posted on the forum can be opportunities for some critical thinking. I am surprised sometimes by the threads that get really long. For example, that one about the trees getting cut down on the boulevards had many people going back and forth on the topic." That poster and a community organizer[34] also highlighted the importance and value of staff actively initiating forum conversations – as well as concerns about the sustainability of that model: "It's been helpful to have someone start those threads since I'm not sure many people would start one. I know I could be better at starting at a new thread." And, "I am not sure the forum would work without having someone whose job it is to do that."

A regular Cedar-Riverside poster[35] considered the content and felt that "The topics have been diverse," and another[36] pointed to the importance of staff serving as information rather than opinion leaders: "I really like the topics raised on the forum. I just wish more people would respond. I like that *(outreach staff)* posts topics without offering an opinion."

> **KEY LEARNING**
> ***What seems to significantly influence content diversity are the following:***
> - ***Intentionally initiating threads that specifically spur conversation***
> - ***Supporting others to post in response to threads***
> - ***Higher volume of threads and posts associated with those threads***

A regular Frogtown poster[37] appreciated the range of posts and her own options: "I really liked the diversity of posts [subjects]. There were some I read and others I didn't even read. The subject headings helped identify if I would even be interested in clicking on it. There were some things [outreach staff] posted that I didn't even know about." And in Cedar-Riverside, a forum participant[38] valued the news and information from the forum: "I also use the forum to watch out for stories and to know what's going on in the neighborhood…There is valuable information in terms of resources and events."

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33 Tony Schmitz
34 Tait Danielson Castillo
35 Salmah Hussein
36 Mustafa Adam
37 Mai Vang
38 Anonymous

A Frogtown community activist[39] further reflected on variation in posts and wanted more: "There are definitely threads that are 'hotter' than others. I would like to see a greater diversity of topics there. Some topics get no publicity [no participation]. One topic no one is discussing is our senior population in the neighborhood. Another is the immigrant population. We need everyone's voice." Yet another Frogtown regular[40] wanted a different kind of variation: "I'd like to see new, random issues posted on the forum. For example, 2-for-1 deals offered by merchants; sales that are going on; general topics that let people know what is going on in the neighborhood."

Yet how "hot" is "too hot"? One Cedar-Riverside poster[41] said he'd heard that people don't like it when outreach staff made posts on controversial topics. His response to those was sometimes to post an encouraging note to show that he supported those topics being addressed.

Further exploring content diversity, we looked at both primary and secondary content of the posts on each forum, as illustrated below.

39 Va-Megn Thoj
40 Genevieve Marault
41 Mustafa Adam

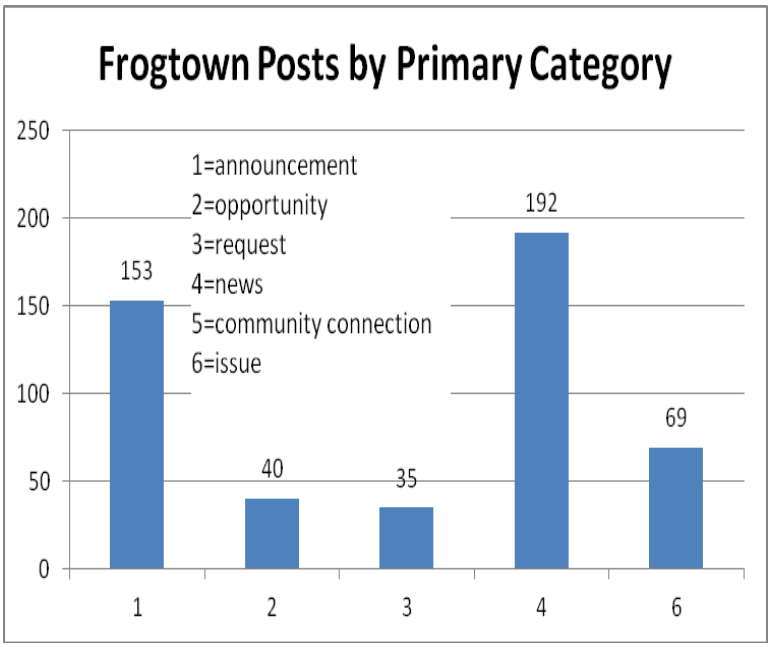
***Figure 24:* Frogtown posts by content category**

These graphs show all posts categorized by content type. The top graph is a broader look at all posts, and is logically similar to the narrower analysis of only the top posters.

Note the nuances of the bottom graph that examines both primary and secondary content category. Although no Frogtown posts were categorized with "community connection" as the primary content, the vast majority of those that had any secondary thrust had that one.

So, for example, an announcement of an event might specifically highlight its importance to Frogtown neighbors or Forum members; or the poster might note a news item and then call out the community connection and encourage Forum discussion around that.

Making that explicit connection enhances content diversity and is an important way to further animate a forum.



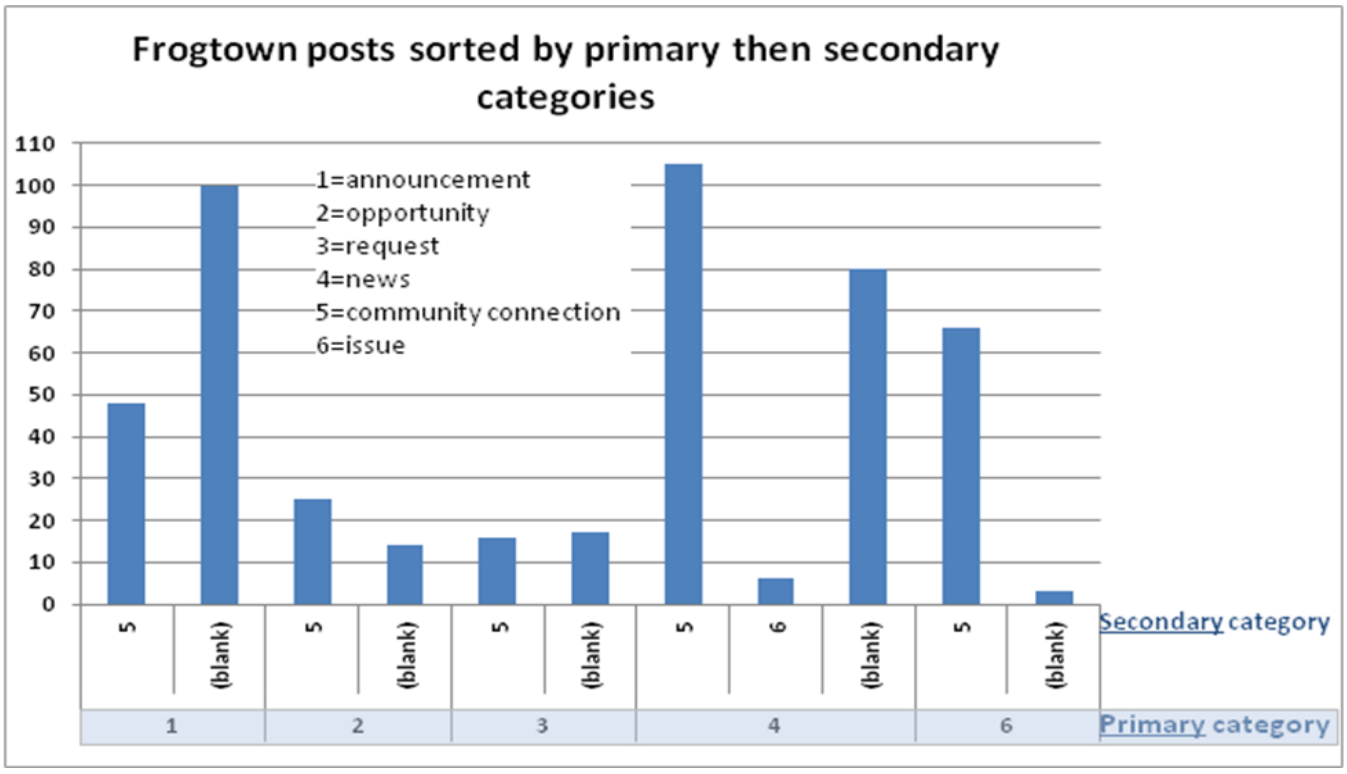


***Figure 25*: Cedar-Riverside posts by content category**

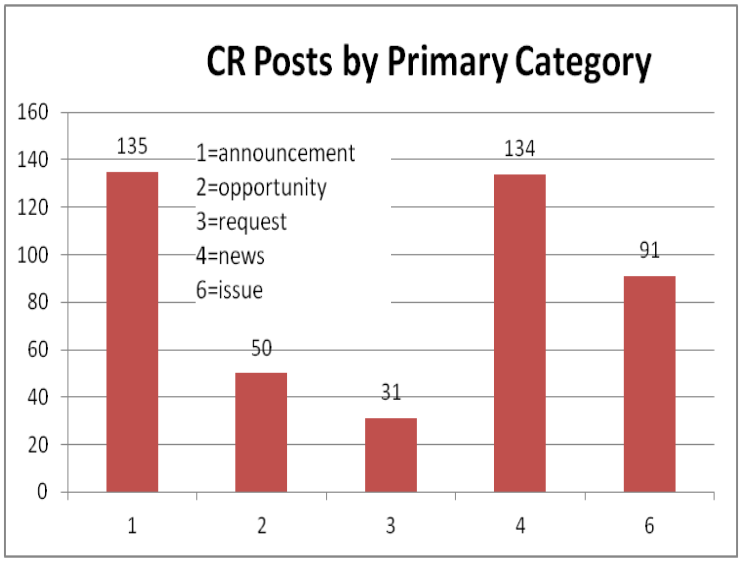
These graphs show all posts categorized by content type. The top graph shows all posts, and is logically similar to the narrower analysis of only the top posters.

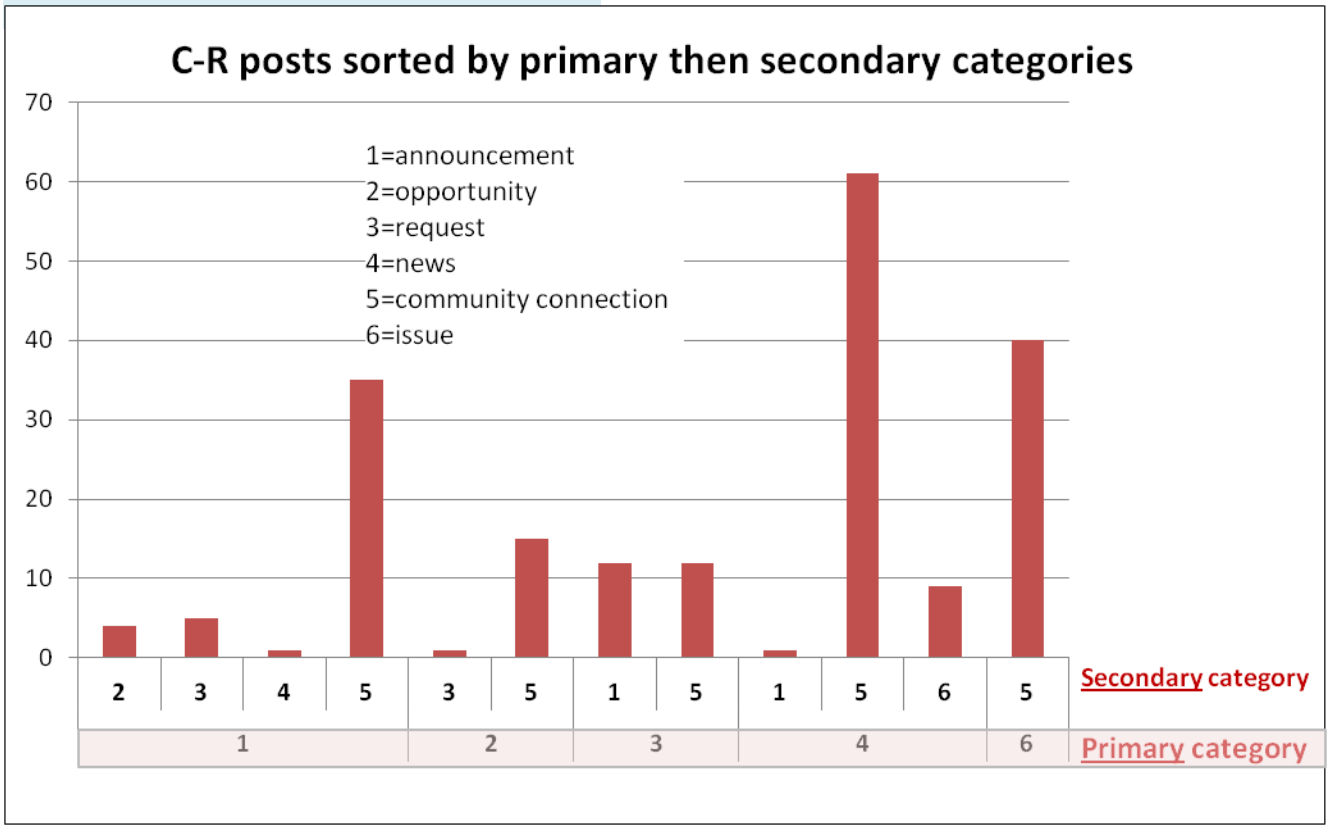
Note the nuances of the bottom graph that examines both primary and secondary content category.

Although only a handful of these posts were categorized with "community connection" as the primary content (and are thus excluded from this analysis), the vast majority of those that had any secondary thrust had that one.

So, for example, an announcement of an event might specifically highlight its importance to Cedar-Riverside neighbors or Forum members; or the poster might note a news item and then call out the community connection and encourage Forum discussion around that.

Making that explicit connection enhances content diversity and is an important way to further animate a forum.





5.4 Different Kinds of Participants and Reasons to Participate

As described in the Outreach Section, staff and volunteers sought out individual neighbors, businesses, community organizations, elected officials, and anyone else they could find who might be interested in the neighborhood forum. We articulated the goal of working in these particular communities, intentionally seeking out the diversity that comes in all forms.

***Figure 26:** Kids from the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood find fun activities as do their parents during National Night Out, providing a good outreach venue*

In many ways it was a two-step process: Increasing the diversity of voices expressed and then getting more representative numbers of people into the forum "space."

- Helping people simply sign up and get on the forum is a huge step because that's the only launch point. The network doesn't end with the members themselves but rather begins with them – we don't know who will be the connecting person who brings forward strong and important voices of community members.

Reaching out to find new forum members at community events was successful in both Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown. With E-Democracy's focus on low-income, communities of color, and new immigrants, events and activities specifically tied to those communities were particularly relevant, as were well-established annual events with a local focus such as National Night Out. Face-to-face events and gathering places like markets were perfect places to meet or reconnect with community members and build important relationships – and eventually trust.

Individuals and organizations also sometimes hooked up with these new neighborhood forums because of a particular community situation. In Cedar-Riverside, for example, some businesses joined the forum when the local mobile soup kitchen was threatened with closure by the police department over a permitting problem. Forum members generated a lot of passionate and practical posts and spurred community attention.

5.5 Who's There and Who's Not

Outreach staff and forum managers discovered numerous barriers to participation among community members in both Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside. As much as staff and other forum members may encourage people to participate in the forum and offer their perspective, we saw resistance in many forms from people who:

- May not want to get involved
- Don't think it's worth their time – especially if they fear the content will be "way out there"
- Are uncomfortable exposing their ideas or opinions to criticism from others
- Fear community hostility or retribution (intangible or experienced)
- Have little or no experience with email or the Internet
- Don't support online communications for these kinds of conversations
- Don't have computer or Internet access

Outreach staff and sometimes forum members are keenly aware of who the forums are attracting, who's posting, and who's missing. For example, in high-density Cedar-Riverside that is home to a large number of relatively recent East African immigrants, it makes sense that there are many Somali voices on the forum. However, outreach staff note that these voices are not representative of either the whole Somali community or the whole community in that neighborhood. Both forums are specifically missing the voice of youth and elders of all kinds. And while there are women members, only a few from either African (Cedar-Riverside) or Hmong (Frogtown) immigrant communities are regular posters on their respective forums.

KEY LEARNING

I don't feel like I'm doing the full outreach I can; it's not as diverse as it should be; the forces are larger than I am; it's a real challenge that I recognize.

—Julia Nekessa Opoti, Cedar-Riverside Forum outreach staff

Other staff also noted that while there has been considerable success recruiting certain cultural communities in both forums, other cultural or ethnic groups are notably absent. This issue has also been raised by forum participants who have noted that people from certain communities seem to post a lot while others voices are rarely if ever heard.

Those more complex issues merit further exploration and examination on these forums as they evolve.

5.5.1 Age, Digital Capacity, and Forum Relevance

Some of our preliminary findings on who does not participate seem to be consistent with other E-Democracy forums around in the world. We speculate that elders and people with minimal formal education may have language and cultural challenges with digital communications or these English-based forums, less access to email, and long-standing customs around more familiar and comfortable forms of neighborly conversations.

And while Cedar-Riverside has a higher number of youth members than other forums, it is rare that youth post either there or on the Frogtown forum. We wonder if youth are less involved on these and other E-Democracy forums for several reasons: While they are digitally astute, as students and young adults they have more connections among peers and interest groups than with geographic neighbors, and are less engaged with the issues and activities around which neighborhood forums revolve.

A Frogtown forum member in her 20s[42] commented on the participation of both elders and youngsters and put it this way: "I didn't even know about it and I lived in Frogtown for nearly 20 years. The age group of people who should know about something like this (in the Hmong community) might not actually be interested in the forum. For example, my parents wouldn't even know how to use it. Internet forums are really new and only younger people know how to use them and know how to socialize on there. Those young people, however, might not be interested about the kinds of things on the forum. They'd have to be interested in the community. For example, my brother is on some other forums but he wouldn't be on the Frogtown forum. He'd be more interested in gaming/entertainment forums."

Our staff also wonder if some youth may be concerned that their parents will find out about their participation in these forums and object to their involvement or to their post content. Staff also noted that even when young people do sign up they tend to change email addresses much more quickly and casually – and our software automatically removes inactive email accounts. At the same time, forum

42 Mai Vang

staff noted that immigrants who arrived as children grew up conversant with technology and now as adults are more comfortable participating on forums such as these.

The desire to engage youth is important for participants, too – albeit a challenge, as one forum participant[43] explained: "The forum should also have more youth, and make them feel more connected. But how does one do this in a community where older (men) have more prominent voices?"

Outreach staff also came to better understand the digital disconnect the more they worked with community members: "In my experience especially in the Hmong community, we [Hmong] are just stepping into the technology world and using the Internet to interact with one another. I'm speaking about people who are in my parent's generation – they may be educated but their ways of communication are not to go online or Skype, but in person or by telephone."[44]

A community organizer in Frogtown who is Hmong[45] reflected on who wasn't participating and why: "There are missing pieces. The more people who know about it, the better. There is a digital divide, though. You have to take into account generational differences, education, etc. The forum can separate people – it can compound the segregation between those who know and can access the Internet and use it and those who don't and cannot. People using it tend to be of a certain demographic."

In Cedar-Riverside, outreach staff noted that the people who community members are interested in connecting with are not online at all, and that the Somali community has a very oral tradition. Events are not planned weeks in advance, but rather someone decides to do something in the next few days and they communicate that when they go out to shop, pick up a child at the Community Center, and so on – and then it happens.

In Cedar-Riverside an active forum participant[46] noted, "This community is largely offline, and I think being on the computer can actually be an obstacle to their daily responsibilities. When I look at my own mother, who is a non-English, non-college-educated immigrant, being on the computer looking for resources and events is a waste of her time. However, she is more aware of community events than I am even though I am constantly online. An online forum might not be the best way for this neighborhood to develop community unless it's specifically targeting the youth who are more likely to engage in online forums. Technology cannot be imposed on a community."

In Frogtown, staff encountered people who have email addresses but never check them, "When they go online they look only at culturally specific website, and if they do use email it is to communicate only with family members – but they still prefer using the phone."

> ***It's hard to figure out some of these intangible things…like Steve [Executive Director Steven Clift] posting about goat's meat; who was that for – about Steve, or about others? It wasn't really natural. Who is this for? What is the goal? It's very, very difficult as people who don't live in the neighborhood, as well as not being part of a Somali community. Is it a cultural exchange program? A resource for people in the community?***
> ***—Julia Nekessa Opoti, Cedar-Riverside Forum outreach staff***

43 Anonymous
44 Marny Xiong
45 Va-Megn Thoj
46 Anonymous

Similarly, a Cedar-Riverside forum participant[47] who is Somali feels that the forum has a unique challenge and poses one of her own to E-Democracy: "The community it wants to serve is very oral. Is E-Democracy imposing technology/the Internet on this community? Do they need a forum? When Cedar-Riverside mothers need a babysitter they will knock on the door next door; if there is a community event they will hear about it from their neighbor. Why do they need an online forum? Who is the forum serving?"

Outreach staff reflected: "We understood the complexities involved with what we wanted to do. We knew most people do not traditionally associate an online forum with civic participation; most people would still consider attending an in-person meeting to be the primary way to get involved in their neighborhood, for example. We did not seek to change or compete with this fact but instead enhance it – providing a medium for neighbors to discuss important issues like the ones explored or debated at those meetings. In the early years of these forums E-Democracy invested seriously in on-the-ground staff to provide faces for an otherwise abstract entity like an online forum and to carry that message to the neighborhood."

For the future, an outreach staff member[48] noted that many of these issues are tied to the particular immigrant populations here at the time, and the need to consider how the next generation of immigrants – children of immigrant parents – uses the forum. He noted that there are definitely some who use the forum this way to communicate, in contrast to the older people using only oral communications. The question is whether young people stay in the neighborhood and take more ownership of the geographic sense of the community vs. only in the cultural sense.

A Cedar-Riverside staff member reflected on future approaches, saying, "As I continue with my outreach efforts I am keen on developing strategies that would allow the community to trust this particular forum. For a community that is very oral with most information relayed through word of mouth and community gatherings. How does E-Democracy fit in? For literate Somalis digital engagement is actually not an issue as there several popular forums (Hirraan, Somalia Online, Somali Life, SomaliNet) and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. However, how do we engage them in a wider issues forum like the E-Democracy one? Considering digital inclusion, how does E-Democracy make a case for communities with little or no access to the Internet?"

5.5.2 Culture, Race, Power – and Gender

At many points in the work building both the Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside forums E-Democracy staff struggled professionally and personally with the participation barriers. Sometimes a shared language, culture, or gender between outreach staff and participants helped, but other times the work was simply disheartening: "It's very overwhelming working in this neighborhood; it's very, very difficult…"

- I don't feel like I'm doing the full outreach I can; it's not as diverse as it should be; the forces are larger than I am; it's a real challenge that I recognize.
- I think that's a cultural aspect with the immigrant population and the divisions in the neighborhood around cultural and ethnic identity; people stay within their communities and speak for themselves; you definitely see more younger people willing to

> *"Sometimes people don't engage in discussions because there are power dynamics on the ground (off the forum) that people don't want to engage with right now."*
> *—Ben Marcy, Cedar-Riverside Forum manager*

47 Anonymous
48 Ben Marcy

get on the forum and say something, especially compared to older people, which may also be about being tech savvy.

- In Cedar-Riverside, a few of the posts by Somali residents reflect sort of high-level isolationism, saying, I'm going to do it my way, I speak for the community, etc. – and others don't know the extent to which that's true.

Both a community organizer[49] and an active resident[50] on the Frogtown Forum noted that many of the most active forum posters are considered active neighborhood leaders already, with the latter, a European-American male, adding, "How do you broaden participation and make it relevant and attractive to someone new? I would like to see more diversity on the forum."

A young Hmong Frogtown forum member whose parents still live in the neighborhood[51] said, "I couldn't tell if the posters were Caucasian or African American but from what I could make out, there didn't seem to be a lot of Hmong people participating and I would guess there were more Caucasians participating."

***Figure 27:* E-Democracy outreach staff talking with people at community events helped people feel welcome and supported**

Issues around advocacy, roles, and power became particularly apparent on the Cedar-Riverside Forum, undoubtedly reflecting the very high-density, ethnically diverse community living and doing business in a comparably small geographic area. One of our outreach staff[52] crisply defined the race and power issues: "There is a power struggle between some members of the Somali community and the older white inhabitants and city officials." And, "The loudest voices tend to be the educated Somali men even though there are many, many other groups."

On E-Democracy forums as in our everyday lives, it's sometimes hard for members to know or decide how to respond when issues around power or race bubble up.

As an outreach staff[53] noted, "People don't always know how much power some of the people who make more 'out there' or outlandish posts have. Even people who disagree just can't be bothered to engage in those conversations. There are also concerns by European-Americans about being labeled a racist if they respond to such posts." He also put these concerns into a larger context: "Some of the posts at times are strongly worded and don't necessarily reflect the breadth of perspectives in the community, and sometimes people aren't prepared to respond to those or offer different perspectives." And he noted the impact: "Sometimes people don't engage in discussions because there are power dynamics on the ground (off the forum) that people don't want to engage with right now. Also, many people don't want to get into online disagreements or back-and-forth exchanges."

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49 Tait Danielson Castillo
50 Tony Schmitz
51 Mai Vang
52 Julia Nekessa Opoti
53 Ben Marcy

An active Cedar-Riverside forum participant[54] pointed out the need for even the most basic cultural and demographic awareness in order to be serious inclusion: "The issue with Cedar-Riverside in general, including the E-Democracy forum, is the assumption that East African means Somali. There are substantial Oromo and Ethiopian populations, as well as Latino and Vietnamese. We never hear from these voices." She then asked, "How can these groups' narratives be heard and captured so that they can tell their different stories?" An outreach staff member[55] similarly reflected, "Trying to get Oromos to participate on the forum where there are so many Somalis is very difficult for them." And another participant[56] noted another dimension of that issue – who speaks for whom – saying, "The East Africans who speak on the forum are not representative of the people who live in the neighborhood."

In Cedar-Riverside one forum participant[57] sees increasing diversity as primarily a matter of time: "There are many immigrant voices on the forum. However, the loudest of them are self-appointed community leaders who are assumed to be speaking on behalf of the whole community. Over time more community leaders will feel comfortable speaking on the forum on their work in the neighborhood. And this will create more diversity."

A Frogtown outreach staff member[58] pushed the conversation further: "When I reach out to communities where I'd be seen as foreign, perhaps we can all be seen as part of the same struggle to make a better community – that may be where we find commonality…I don't have to be a Black person to relate to a Black person. We can have conversations about what's affecting *our* community and what we can do together to change."

> ***Our interviews for this evaluation helped us better understand how the public visibility of these forums can challenge traditional roles and hierarchies by providing online space for all those who want a voice. While one could say that our forums are "working" when posters speak out in new ways and get noticed – negatively or positively – our goal is to ensure our forums are a place where everyone feels safe and empowered to actively participate in community life.***
> ***—Steven Clift, E-Democracy executive director***

Gender: We have called out gender specifically because it emerged as a very distinct and important issue particularly in Cedar-Riverside where some on that forum found gender or underlying community and role issues insurmountable or nearly so. Specifically, there are some instances where East African women reported to E-Democracy staff that they were threatened or harassed directly as a result of their posts on the Cedar-Riverside Forum.

For example, E-Democracy outreach staff[59] told about a regular poster who a few weeks earlier had received a phone call telling her "she'd better watch out, watch what she's doing, look at who her real allies are. They had her dad and uncles call her and tell her to stop." Our staff member bemoaned such threats both for their impact on the women and on the broader community: "She is doing so much in the community; she needs all the help she can get; she is fighting these men." The staff member also identified other specific instances of successful threats against women, saying

54 Anonymous
55 Julia Nekessa Opoti
56 Salmah Hussein
57 Salmah Hussein
58 Marny Xiong
59 Julia Nekessa Opoti

that, "_____ doesn't post on the forum anymore because she got private messages – her dad heard about her posting in the restaurant he owns; she faced too many pressures."

One of our male Cedar-Riverside outreach staff[60] offered his perspective on gender-specific posting differences: "More women are offering responses and thoughtful insights while more of the men do talking-point responses; the women more often call for things to happen outside of the forum." And a male forum participant[61] noted, "Many of them feel powerless. They think they are being manipulated. What is in it for them?" And one of the women[62] on the forum noted, "Dominating voices discourage lurkers from making comments."

In some cases it was a combination of political and personal discussions on the Cedar-Riverside Forum that were threatening to some women.

One poster[63] said, "The political nature of many of the discussions on the forum pushed me away because I was not interested in engaging in that. It is a frustrating forum to follow because things very quickly become personal on and off the forum." She continued, "I would like to see the forum continue to focus on community initiatives and not political discussions, as those tend to get combative and personal."

Another woman poster[64] found the same: "To be honest, the beginning [of the forum] was OK, but as time went on the forum become more political and the personal attacks became more intense. It was not worth my time…. There are too many issues going on, with everyone seeking a personal agenda. I decided to distance myself because my goal is to do things that would benefit the community."

Some women on the Cedar-Riverside forum also found these issues were transferred to other electronic settings, with one[65] saying, "A post I had written was forwarded to other email listervs. I was really uncomfortable with that because I expected the conversation to stay within the forum." Another woman[66] who was active on the forum had similar experiences: "Also, I realized that every time I posted something on the E-Democracy forum someone would attack something that I said. Or I would get offline messages admonishing something that I said." She compared that with social media, saying, "On Twitter I am semi-anonymous so I can speak out without fear of a backlash. And on Facebook I am only friends with people that I know so I feel safer to comment there."

Some of the gender issues in East African communities in Cedar-Riverside posed a real conundrum for outreach staff, as one[67] wrote on the E-Democracy blog in 2010:

> At an informal meeting with several Somali women I learned that the negative press and abrasive online comments on websites such as the Star Tribune newspaper have resulted in a complete distrust of non-Somali websites. One woman said that as a community organizer, her daily battles are constant, and she did not have the energy to constantly "defend her community." While E-Democracy forums are facilitated and users are required to use their real names

60 Ben Marcy
61 Mustafa Adam
62 Anonymous
63 Anonymous
64 Anonymous
65 Salmah Hussein
66 Salmah Hussein
67 Julia Nekessa Opoti

protecting members from such diatribe, these women are still hesitant to participate.

What about softer, cultural issues like explaining Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting? Again, they spoke about online attack fatigue. As I look ahead to future postings and building trust it will be important to include topics that do not rile up controversy such as profiles of businesses and people in the community, and resources.

E-Democracy is in a unique position. Unlike many organizations the forum doesn't want anything from the community. Not in the literal sense anyway. Of course, for the vibrancy and the posterity of the forum, participation is key. A key factor is making sure that people understand the forum's diversity is only as rich as its member participation.

At times, Cedar-Riverside outreach staff[68] found they could leverage their personal relationships to keep people engaged: "In December, *(anonymous)* asked me to take her off the forum – as she had before – and again I followed up and kept her on. I told her we needed voices like hers. I wouldn't ever have been able to do that if I hadn't developed this longer-term relationship with her."

5.5.3 Business and Institutional Participation

Both forums struggled to engage businesses and institutions – including the University of Minnesota and Augsburg College in Cedar-Riverside – for reasons including lack of interest or perceived relevance, no key contact who saw this involvement as part of their responsibility, no Internet access (many small immigrant-owned businesses), or simply other priorities. This challenge was shared by both outreach staff and forum participants, as one[69] of the latter explained, "I want to let people know what's going on, and to share my opinion. When we started the forum I walked around Cedar-Riverside letting small businesses know that they could participate on the forum. It got to a point where when they saw me coming they would look the other way. They have not bought into the value of the forum – not as I have."

KEY LEARNING

The power of our forums is that it starts with the members rather than ending with them. We ask our participants to be the people who "translate" what's happening online in their neighborhood for their families. And the more people who participate in our forums, the more impact they have – and it's not linear, it's exponential.

—Steven Clift, E-Democracy executive director

It was interesting to see the difference between people who posted as residents or business owners within the forum's community vs. those who posted in their work roles within the community. One Frogtown forum member[70] who is also active in community-based decision making was disappointed in this, saying, "It looks like the people who are posting are doing it as part of their job sometimes. I wish more people in the neighborhood (residents) were posting – not professionals. Some of the most active neighbors I know don't post, so I wonder why not."

In many situations immigrant small business owners did not have any online presence or use email, and some storeowners and employees did not speak English – making communication with them and participation on the current English-

68 Julia Nekessa Opoti
69 Mustafa Adam
70 Genevieve Marault

based issues forums an enormous challenge. Similarly, some business people didn't see the forum relating to their sense of community or reflecting the people they served – so they saw neither relevance nor connection that would justify their participation.

In some cases, outreach staff found there was simply no way to make one of our issues forums relevant or meaningful to community members. For example, in trying to reach out to small businesses in Cedar-Riverside, "…there's a mall with about 50 stores with women selling everything imaginable plus services; most did not speak English and even if I went with a translator there was no interest in being on the Internet."

An added challenge is that businesses are capitalistic enterprises, and on E-Democracy forums participants are not to use the forum as a blatant advertising tool for themselves. A small number of businesses on both forums have figured out how to demonstrate community goodwill in their online participation as forum members. Most businesses, however, haven't found a logical connection between the hard work they do every day to meet customer needs and stay solvent, and being involved as a businessperson on a forum where they can't directly advertise their good/services and where they may not see any connection to their customers.

A singular exception to this is a long-standing hardware store in the broader Cedar-Riverside community that periodically posts on that forum about their community-oriented efforts – such as being the drop site for donated mittens for neighborhood children. E-Democracy staff have been instrumental in making and maintaining that connection with the forum. It will be interesting to watch over time whether they maintain this generous community role *and* continue posting about it on the forum.

6 Program Outcome: Engaging Organizers, Organizations, Institutions, and Elected Officials

Guiding Questions:

- In what ways did E-Democracy connect with and encourage proactive use by community organizers? Community organizations and institutions? Elected officials?
- Do these individuals/ groups have particularly unique or different roles on the forums?
- How are community organizers and elected officials using the forums for active listening?
- In what ways do posts and posters on the forums display a sense of community belonging, as well as government, institutional, and community accountability?

6.1 Outreach to Community Organizers, Community Organizations and Institutions, and Elected Officials

E-Democracy established a specific objective to reach out to and engage community organizers, organizations, institutions, and elected officials. Following through involved the typical sequence of events: Making contact in person or on the phone, explaining the forum, discussing how it might be relevant to and aligned with their needs and priorities, providing information on how to sign up, discussing the kinds of posts that would benefit them and forum members, encouraging their participation, and so on.

All this begs the critical question, however: For what purpose and to what end is all this engagement happening? As one of our outreach staff[71] wrote in an E-Democracy blog post in late 2010, "While community organizing is not E-Democracy's direct mission, the organization's desire to increase civic engagement by providing an online space for neighbors to meet and discuss issues lends itself well to also aiding in, or perhaps inciting, organizing work. Giving neighbors and organizers a venue in which to share information can complement traditional community organizing. At the same time, this raises the question of how E-Democracy might enhance community organizing and social change in the 21st century."

This section thus begins with a discussion about how the Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside Forums intersected with people, issues, and action around locally important issues, and then examines the relationships – or not – between these forums and community organizations, organizers, institutions, and elected officials.

6.2 The Organizing Power of Local Issues

Important local issues of many kinds bring people together on our online issues forums just as they have in person since humans first began living in community. On our Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside forums that coming together has generated active discussions and in some cases action, regardless of whether the issues were general or specific. As one Cedar-Riverside participant[72] said about that forum, "There is need for people to have voice. There are so many things going wrong, but no one is talking about it. I hope my comments make people aware that they should be comfortable enough to say whatever. I care about my people and my neighborhood."

71 Boa Lee
72 Mustafa Adam

The forums also in some cases create a space where people can address complex issues around culture and race.

***Figure 28*: From a Cedar-Riverside post, neighbors at the Brian Coyle Community Center**

One Cedar-Riverside participant[73] posted about an issue she had with the University of Minnesota Police Department that was relevant because the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood directly abuts the University campus on the west side of the Mississippi River (see map in Section 3.2): "I made a comment about the University of Minnesota Police Department's description of 'East African' suspects because I wanted to make constructive criticism, and to show that what they were doing was not right. One of my [college] instructors read my post and said that I was being rude to [local City Councilmember] Cam Gordon who I thought should have played a larger role in having UMPD change their suspect description. Anyway, I did not want my online comments to affect my relationship with my instructors." Even so, the poster saw at least one positive, "...the discussion on the forum made other people outside the University community know that there was an issue."

Just like on other E-Democracy forums, however, many different people get involved when there is some kind of community crisis. As one Cedar-Riverside staff member[74] noted, "When they had the shooting nearby by a youth – a botched robbery – three people died. A forum member claimed on the forum that they couldn't rely on the police to protect them and he offered to train people to get a legal concealed weapon permit. Suddenly lots of youth were saying, 'Yeah, we do need our own weapons, it's really bad!' Youth workers and others weighed in with other perspectives and created an opportunity for people to really talk about this very important issue that was real in the community."

A culturally related issue that drew posts from many perspectives was the proposal from a local development-oriented nonprofit to brand a portion of Frogtown "Little Mekong." A Frogtown outreach staff[75] member discussed these issues in a lengthy E-Democracy blog post.

> One of my first one-on-ones was with the leader of a new business association in the community. His organization had been strategizing about how to bring in tourism dollars, especially since they feared a planned light rail line in the community would upset business. When I asked this organizational leader how I might make the forum more useful for him, he told me that his organization needed to garner public input about an idea to name a very specific area of the neighborhood as the Little Mekong business district.

73 Salmah Hussein
74 Steven Clift
75 Boa Lee

Seeding the Little Mekong commercial district topic on the Greater Frogtown neighbors forum was a way to meet this organization's needs. Greater than that, however, was knowledge about the neighborhood's history and the general opinions of my "best allies" related to any idea of branding.

Resident leaders who had already been participating, as well as the ones I wanted to start posting, responded overwhelmingly – and within a matter of hours. From my single post, we got nearly 20 additional posts from residents. Best of all, this gave the neighborhood association leader a chance to increase his participation by posting a response to educate forum members.

It is also relevant to note that the forum posts did include some discussion from middle-aged European-American community members who were concerned about the images that a "Mekong" reference would bring to mind among the generation who lived through what they call the Vietnam War.

While staff had at one point envisioned that they would sit down with specific organizations and directly show them how to post to the forum[76], that wasn't the barrier in most cases. Here's what that nonprofit's executive director[77] had to say about the "Little Mekong" project described above: "I didn't join or participate because our work is still too brand new and the issues we'd want to post about were still being developed. I also wasn't planning on posting yet, so I didn't sign up as a member. Our plans are moving forward now to implement the Little Mekong marketing piece, so we will be utilizing the forum as one way to reach residents."

He added, "It was good to see the Little Mekong issue on the forum. I heard about it from one of my board members who saw the post and forwarded it to me. I didn't want to exchange information quite yet. I could tell from the posts that there is still a misunderstanding about what we are doing with the economic development marketing; we aren't changing the name of the neighborhood. We want to create a business destination. That post allowed us to see the questions that people might have when we are ready to meet with the residents. We can be better prepared as a result. The other good thing about the Little Mekong issue being posted on the forum is that it gave us an outlet to clarify the issue through newspaper articles such as in the [online] Twin Cities Daily Planet. I think that article helped answer people's questions."

> ***We're building a community information stream. It's completely different from a community news blog provided by a single editor – we're helping everyone participate themselves rather than doing it for them. It's truly an empowerment model.***
> ***—Steven Clift, E-Democracy executive director***

A Cedar-Riverside forum member[78] noted that community is *only* created when there are common issues. At the same time, she pointed out, "Most of the time there is a stark difference between the lives of the forum members and the community." Another poster[79] definitely found "a sense of community amongst people who post" on that forum, but that can also result in a mentality that inadvertently facilitates "ad hominem attacks on establishments, institutions, and the government that result in isolating different ethnic groups on the forum."

76 Steven Clift
77 Va-Megn Thoj
78 Anonymous
79 Anonymous

The notion of community doesn't depend solely on drama, however. Frogtown outreach staff[80] found that "regular posters really do find a sense of community, for example, some people are starting to use the forum to talk about who's at the table and who's missing – such as [a participant] asking for more Hmong participants on the Promise Neighborhood Solution Action Groups."

A Frogtown forum participant[81] said, "I like that the topics were interesting and pertained to neighborhood. I didn't know about some of those events [outreach staff] posted. Being on forum I felt more connected to what's going on in the neighborhood. [In the winter, outreach staff] posted about the snow plowing [requiring people to get their cars off the road] and that's really important for me and my family. I like that when things come up, they get posted right away so we would know right away." Though Minnesota winters often bring people together to help out, one Cedar-Riverside participant[82] "…was disappointed at the turn the discussion took when I asked for help during a snowstorm [in winter 2010]. I wanted to leave the forum, but [outreach staff] convinced me to stay."

A Frogtown outreach staff posted the following to the E-Democracy blog later in 2010 documenting how the forum helped people move forward on an important community issue.

> In June 2010, I seeded a topic asking the Greater Frogtown Neighbors Forum members where they got their hyper-local (neighborhood) news. No one responded to that thread. But one person did start a new related thread that same day in response, stating that Frogtown was at a disadvantage by not having a dedicated newspaper and asking for creative ideas to get community news distributed to neighbors. The following day and just eight posts later (the thread ballooned to 19 posts), Tony Schmitz – a Frogtown resident and the former owner of the now-defunct Frogtown Times newspaper – offered to take the online discussion offline. Schmitz offered to host a brainstorming session at his house.
>
> Seven days after the thread started, Tony and two other residents (one of whom was Tony's wife), Mary Turck from the Twin Cities Daily Planet (an online news site), and I discussed the idea of starting a Frogtown neighborhood newspaper. By the time the meeting ended, those in attendance had each volunteered to do more research or outreach about the idea. The neighbors become their own community organizers.
>
> This is an example of the convergence of new technologies with old organizing models. What we know of traditional community organizing is that results are met when a group of people can come together to push for a common benefit. To build a foundation of support requires outreach, strategic planning and, oftentimes, good timing. Organizers will need to determine whether and when E-Democracy is the proper venue in which to share information and receive input. As community organizing takes greater advantage of social media and the Internet, adding a new tool like posting on the E-Democracy online forums can become part of the strategic outreach method that capitalizes on changing technology and a growing and attentive audience.

80 Boa Lee
81 Mai Vang
82 Anonymous

6.3 Engaging Community Organizations, Organizers, and Institutions

A key conclusion around this topic is that while we learned a lot about what doesn't work, our learnings are very specific and thus not appropriately generalized, and as we weren't consistently successful we know we have a lot to learn about how to make E-Democracy forums relevant to institutions, community organizations, and organizers.

6.3.1 Institutions

Institutions were particularly challenging. We mentioned the two universities that are within the scope of the Cedar-Riverside Forum above under Business and Institutional Participation.

More broadly speaking, outreach staff faced the following challenges:

- Finding specific individuals within major institutions for whom even a conversation about online neighborhood forums was relevant.
- Understanding/communicating appropriate points of connection between the institution's work and the E-Democracy forum as a window into the community. While some institutions are deeply connected to their physically neighboring communities, for many others what they *do* is unrelated to where they *are*. That meant that in some cases a connection with the local community – through the forum or not – really didn't make sense to them or from the community's and E-Democracy's perspectives.
- The sense among some Cedar-Riverside community members that they sometimes feel like "lab rats" for the immediately adjacent University of Minnesota. While University students and faculty may be sensitive to and working to address those concerns, community perceptions are slow to change and ought to be considered when E-Democracy approaches such major institutions to be involved in forums.
- Recognizing that some (or many) institutional relationships with a forum may need ongoing and regular attention from E-Democracy staff, and absent such specific attention may be unsustainable.

These allowed us to further reflect on our purpose for and selection of prospective institutional participants on our forums. In the future we will likely do more advance planning to think through which of these institutional relationships are most likely to bring value first to participants in a community forum, and of course also to the local institution.

> **TIP**
> ***Ask community organizations to add the forum email address to their press release distribution list and e-newsletter contact database.***

6.3.2 Community Organizations and Organizers

One struggle we faced is it was *so obvious* to us how community organizations and organizers would benefit from their incorporating the forums into their work. It seemed like such a "no-brainer" to us that we were unprepared when they weren't overwhelmingly and immediately supportive. We quickly learned that we didn't understand their needs and priorities as well as we thought we did.

Staff set a goal of having local community and cultural organizations post directly to the forum about very basic things – who they were, what they do, their community events and activities, and so on. That expectation assumed all the necessary information already existed and they were already communicating it using other means, so there would be minimal new content (e.g., take an existing flyer and quickly post a digital version). We also set a short-term goal with our outreach staff to have them visit these organizations to explain the local forum, jointly identify existing content that could be easily posted and

was relevant to forum members, help them sign up and make an initial post, identify and offer to initially support someone from the organization to regularly post to the forum, and so on.

That's not what actually happened once outreach staff started connecting with these organizations and organizers. Frogtown outreach staff[83] explained their learnings this way on the project blog early in 2010:

> One thing I was aware of going in is the nature and condition of relationships between the different organizations serving Greater Frogtown, and those organizations and residents or those organizations and businesses. People who hold leadership positions at these organizations have been around for quite some time. They bring a rich historical knowledge of and allegiance to the community. **The flip side of that is some of them are also wary of new entities that begin working in the community** *[emphasis added]*.

Of particular relevance to this report are the following learnings and guidance from the same blog post:

> Never assume that all the organizations work well together or that they even agree on approaches or solutions to the issues facing the community. Know also that as a ("virtual") newcomer, you and the work you will be doing will be highly scrutinized. It's in your best interest that you don't go into a meeting with an established organization thinking you will get or demand that you get their attention, participation, and trust. Those are things built over time and an organization will give you more respect if you let your actions – and your work – speak for itself. Being transparent is extremely important and they appreciate that.

She then drew some conclusions about outreach to organizations:

> By the end of our 2010 pilot outreach effort, we returned to some of the organizational leaders we met with at the beginning of the year. While we saw greater participation (posting versus just reading or "lurking") among a few community organizations, we also noticed that a few never participated at all or rarely posted. The reasons varied but one organization told us they simply were not ready to participate. One organization wanted to preserve the quality and depth of dialogue on the forum by first having solid research and details to share with the community, its executive director said. Another organization we met with began using the forum to regularly post meeting and event announcements. We heard that at one of its meetings, when people were asked how they had heard about the meeting, the majority in attendance said they had seen it posted on the Frogtown Forum.
>
> We have never expected all community organizations to participate on the forum. We know the pressures community organizations face and, in particular, their reservations about technology and online forums – chiefly that with their base in a lower income neighborhood not all of their constituents are online. We have used this past year in service to these organizations – helping to post their meeting

83 Boa Lee

announcements on their behalf on the forum. We look forward to having them participate on a greater level in the future and in a manner that is helpful to them.

Outreach staff and community members from both Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown had additional thoughts about working with community organizations and organizers, as did those we were trying to engage in the forums and other forum participants.

- Cedar-Riverside outreach staff[84]: With these community organizers and their doing the face-to-face work there is no imprint, no record, no accountability; with an organizer having to make a statement on the forum, it's different…it's there for the public record and they have to stick by it.
- Frogtown outreach staff[85] noted that a well-connected initiative tasked with building community connections to support educational opportunities for children faced challenges at their end that were even larger than ours. As the project was federally funded and accountable to a major local nonprofit, the city, and the school district, there was no clarity at all from whom they needed to obtain permission or support in order to formally add the Frogtown Forum to their communications mechanisms – so in spite of sincere efforts on everyone's parts, there is still no connection between this initiative and the Frogtown Forum.
- Frogtown forum member[86]: Some posts by organizations were never "closed up" – they did not respond to questions. Could this be a problem with the communication loop? In other words, do the organizations simply have too many communication vehicles to keep track of?

A community organizer[87] for the city district council that covers Frogtown told outreach staff[88] he didn't want to be involved with the forum because if he did it would almost say that he isn't doing a good job reaching out to people one-on-one – it might suggest he failed there, so he had to resort to online means. What's interesting about this situation is that he is a long-time member and occasional poster on the larger citywide St. Paul Issues Forum (SPIF). As he explained, on SPIF he posts as a St. Paul community member, not in his official capacity with the district council: "This [Frogtown Forum] is supposed to be a place where neighbors communicate with each other so I don't want to participate extensively because I would like to see them be the ones who share information with each other. We watch the posts and respond only if we feel like we absolutely have to – to clarify something, for example."

He continued, "I know of at least one organization that uses the forum to post meeting announcements. I was at one of those meetings and a few people said they'd heard about the meeting through the forum. We don't post our meetings because I'd like to have neighbors be empowered to share that information among each other."

> ***Outreach is all about the band-wagon effect. You get your best allies on board and sooner or later you will also get a few primary organizations involved.***
>
> ***These organizations want to be seen and heard wherever their constituents are. If these organizational leaders post, you'll begin establishing your presence in the community and garnering some trust among participants.***
>
> ***—Boa Lee, E-Democracy Frogtown Forum staff member***

84 Ben Marcy
85 Boa Lee
86 Genevieve Marault
87 Tait Danielson Castillo
88 Boa Lee

In the previous section we talked about the Asian economic development organization working on branding a section of University Avenue in St. Paul, "Little Mekong." The organization's executive director[89] knows that to accomplish this he'll have to reach out especially to residents – but he's not yet ready to do so. Our Frogtown outreach staff[90] suggested that the only way to get someone in that kind of situation to participate in the forum is for him to see that lots of people to whom he wants to reach out are using the forum. "That will take time," she suggested, "and once he sees that and the momentum starts building, he won't have a choice – but now he does."

A different set of exchanges on the Frogtown Forum highlighted another reason community organizations and organizers may hesitate posting: Fear of or concerns about public attacks that could hurt their reputation. In this instance, a Frogtown participant[91] sharply criticized a grassroots political and social action organization on their advocacy and position around a contentious Hmong-specific issue, challenging their right to speak out on this when they are not a Hmong-run or -focused organization.

While E-Democracy staff saw this as a perfect opportunity for the organization to explain what they do as well as the basis for and credentials around this topic – and even offered to help the organization participate meaningfully in the forum – they instead chose to be silent and backed away from forum participation. It is important to understand that this is not a small, young, or inexperienced organization – in fact just the opposite. But they clearly were not willing to engage in what they likely saw as a public conflict over which they had no control, preferring instead to continue communicating with community members using traditional means as they have done successfully for many years.

KEY LEARNING

There certainly are people, organizations, and issues for which E-Democracy's forums are not at all well suited…and in many cases those align with situations where our forums are not well accepted or used.

One challenge, then, is to decide if we need to change that equation at one end or another, or simply be aware of it and factor it into our work as a "given."

One of our Cedar-Riverside staff[92] further notes that open forums like ours don't necessarily serve the interests of organizations because they already have their own stakeholder/constituent lists and communications tools and don't see value in engaging other people or groups on particular issues. For the future, he continues, "It's interesting to think about pushing more of those organizations to see the overlap of what they're doing with the neighborhood and those constituencies."

Some of these concerns by community organizations were echoed in a conversation that E-Democracy's executive director had with the national Progressive Technology Project. The Project has also found that many long-standing community organizations and organizers generally believe that while the Internet is helpful for things like fundraising, active listening and agenda-creating needs to be done in person.

One nonprofit executive director[93] who is not a forum member highlighted another nuance with community organizations this way: "Some of our board members are forum members. Our membership, however, is probably not going to be online. The Internet is just not accessible to them right now and we find face-to-face or phone more useful for the population we work with [immigrant business owners].

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89 Va-Megn Thoj
90 Boa Lee
91 Blia Yang
92 Ben Marcy
93 Va-Megn Thoj

We are trying to convince our members they need to have an online presence [as part of their marketing]."

In spite of all this, at least this community organizer sees the positives: "I like how the forum is Frogtown-specific. You can set yourself up as a resource for people. Residents can come together on there since there is no other space for them to do that online – District 7 [Community Council] doesn't have that on their website." We are also starting to see more community organizations using E-Democracy forums to make announcements and invite people to major events, and some community organizers using the forums as a tool to communicate *about* their organizing – rather than as a way to organize from the beginning.

As we discuss in the following section on elected officials, another concern raised by staff from some community organizations was the risk associated with highly opinionated email-based exchanges that may become "dueling monologues" – and that are additionally constrained by the two-post-a-day limit on most of the E-Democracy forums. It could be that the organization noted above may have found it not worth their time and energy to try and address their complex issues on a forum such as this.

We speculate that from the perspective of some organizations, institutions, or elected officials, one "given" of E-Democracy forums is that since posts are not pre-filtered or -moderated[94] there is only a limited buffer against extreme, aggressive, and untruthful statements or accusations by posters. In combination with the two-post-per-day limit, that structure may be seen as continually exposing such entities to what they perceive as a risk. In addition, they may see this as quite different from community accountability or typical public access because our forums create a space where all opinions can *appear* to have equal weight, value, and truthfulness even when they are, in fact, not.

6.3.3 Engaging Elected Officials

While we see our forums as an opportunity for community members to hold elected officials accountable *and* for elected officials to hear from and communicate with their constituents, we have a lot more work to do on both the Cedar-Riverside and Frogtown Forums.

E-Democracy's executive director highlighted the interrelationship between forum members' posts, elected officials and government staff, and decision making this way: "The more 'value' that forum members generate for elected officials and government staff, the more influence forum members will have on decision making and public services. When elected officials perceive that value they typically routinely monitor the forum and engage because it makes sense, it's worth their time, and it helps them engage and serve their constituents."

In the meantime, the sparse participation of local elected officials on forums can feel like stonewalling to forum participants, one of whom said[95], "It takes a lot of discussions going for government officials to respond." A Frogtown community member[96] felt strongly about accountability, saying, "I think the elected officials – the decision-makers – need to be online to answer questions to make the forum a more effective online engagement [tool]. Ideally, you'd want to have full participation [across all groups]."

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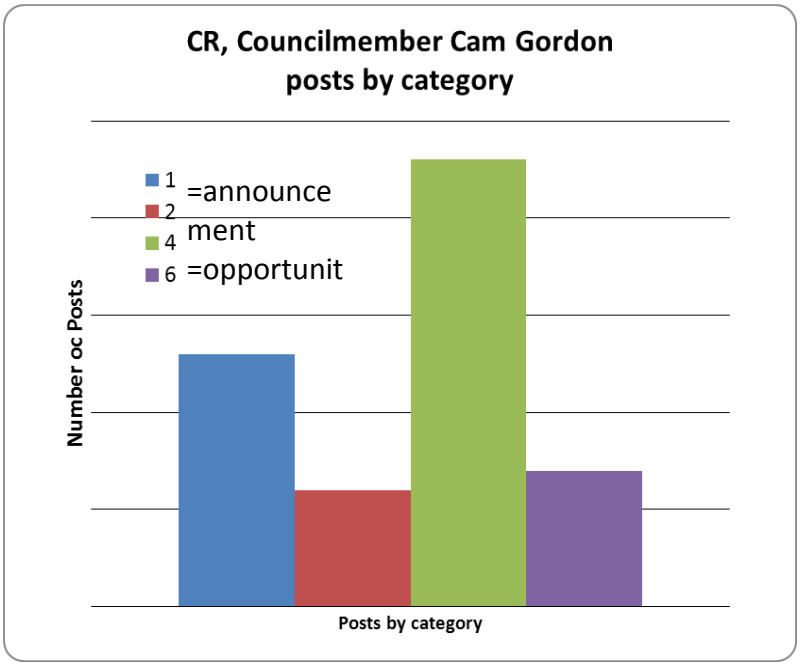
[94] Most E-Democracy forums do moderate new members to limit spam, screen out obvious false identities, etc. All our forums have strict civility rules and are facilitated by local volunteer Forum Managers who can issue warnings leading to time-based suspensions. This balance between freedom and responsibility still results in the perceived loss of control by those typically used more control.

95 Anonymous

96 Va-Megn Thoj

In Cedar-Riverside, for example, local City Councilmember Cam Gordon posts regularly but primarily the e-version of his regular communications content. That said, he and his staff do make other posts (see chart) and there were a handful of occasions in 2010 when he responded via the forum to important community concerns. Outreach staff noted that even short and simple forum responses from elected officials were better than none at all, and they appreciated his additional contributions.



A regular poster[97] also appreciated his responsiveness, noting that "When the shooting happened, if it wasn't for the forum, I don't think he [Councilmember Gordon] would have shown up to the vigil. But he did, even though he did not want to answer anyone's questions [during the vigil]."

A Cedar-Riverside poster[98] thinks she can understand the reluctance of some elected officials and made the connection to racially charged community conversations, reflecting, "[City Councilmember] Cam Gordon tends to drop information on the forum, but doesn't engage as much as I would like to see. On the other hand, I understand his apprehension and caution as he might not want to impose himself on the racial politics of the neighborhood."

Councilmember Gordon told our outreach staff that he appreciated the forum: "The topics are all useful. They give me a sense of what people are doing and thinking. It offers an opportunity for civic organizations to post their minutes. I wish more of them could do this because the forum reaches people who might not be on their listervs. I like to hear input from people that I represent, no matter the fora."

***Figure 29*: From a Frogtown forum post, St. Paul Mayor speaking at a local economic development event**

In St. Paul, City Councilmember Melvin Carter represents the Frogtown area and lurked for quite some time on both the Frogtown neighborhood forum and the larger St. Paul Issues Forum (outreach staff noted that his wife was a Frogtown forum member and occasional poster in 2010).

Councilmember Carter has not regularly posted on the Frogtown forum, however, and explained, "I get the daily digest and I definitely read it. If there is something in there that someone needs help with or an answer to, I'll take it to my staff and one of us will contact the poster privately. We've done that a few times now. It's really helped us to find out

97 Mustafa Adam
98 Anonymous

what's going on and what people are talking about. We also can tell from discussions whether we're doing a good enough job getting the information out there because if there are questions and we have to respond, we might have to look at that."

Even with those positives, Carter explained, "I don't post as often as I should…this is mainly because I want to make sure there is another set of eyes to review what I want to communicate before I send it out and I don't always have the time or staff to have those edits done." He also openly shied away from what he called the "bashing" that sometimes happens on the larger St. Paul Issues Forum, and was frank in saying, "It can become too cumbersome for us to respond every time."

Another forum member put the onus for engaging elected officials on the forum itself: "I don't think that E-Democracy holds enough public officials accountable. I think that it allows public officials to know what people are saying, but it does not make them do anything about it."

E-Democracy is also drafting a guide to help elected officials and government staff understand E-Democracy forums, how they are different compared to other similar-looking online vehicles, and both the challenges and opportunities of participating. We expect to continue improving our support as we get more participation and input from elected officials and staff, and to further examine in what ways the participation of elected officials (perceived value) may be correlated with the diversity of forum members, the range or content of posts, and other variables.

7 Program Outcome: Forum Leadership and Management

Except as noted, the guidance below was provided by E-Democracy staff as part of their work on this evaluation project, once again illustrating their sincere commitment to helping the forums become better every day.

7.1 Forum Management/Managers

Especially for neighborhood forums, volunteer forum managers should proactively seek out information about what's going on in the community and share it on the forum. This has benefit as a simple posting but becomes a powerful stimulant of forum activity when the poster (who may be a forum manager or regular forum member) poses thoughtful questions that explicitly stimulate constructive forum discussion. It is very clear that such posts increase the number of subsequent posts, the number of posters, and the depth of posts. When this is frequently or consistently done, the overall forum becomes more active and gains strength and capacity.

Frogtown staff member Boa Lee explained this clearly: "I feel that seeding [when someone intentionally starts a new thread and typically poses conversation-starting questions or comments] is a way of demonstrating the forum's value. Doing this makes it far easier to move diverse communities toward doing that themselves over time. That's not obvious from the start to small organizations, niche communities; it's not remotely an easy sell. If we go out and recruit people to post at, for example, a local festival, and they post for themselves, that's a good thing."

KEY LEARNING

Rather than just passing on an announcement, the staff member framed the post to encourage forum discussion – which worked.

That was a significant intellectual effort and can't be easily replicated or taught step-by-step.

A regular Frogtown poster[99] very much valued the staff member's[100] content seeding as noted above: "I see that you post all the time. It's been helpful to have someone start those threads since I'm not sure many people would start one. I know I could be better at starting new threads."

Another Frogtown poster had similar compliments to this forum staff member: "You provide a service – that is, you gather the news and post it. I am not sure the forum would work without having someone whose job it is to do that. You also are a journalist; you can write." At the same time, he wondered about the downside to this: "In a way, I wonder if you also intimidated people who didn't think they could write as well and prevented them from participating. It'll be interesting to see what happens when your time with E-Democracy is up – whether any [forum member] picks up what you had been doing."[101] Finally, another Frogtown forum member[102] said, "The subject headings helped identify if I would even be interested in clicking on it. There were some things you posted that I didn't even know about."

99 Tony Schmitz
100 Boa Lee
101 In fact forum volume in 2011 dropped considerably when Boa Lee left this role on the Frogtown forum
102 Mai Vang

7.2 Managing and Measuring Outreach

While E-Democracy staff also felt that it was very strategic to have the people doing the outreach reflect the community, one of our outstanding questions is the extent to which future outreach needs to be better matched to the target participants. We found that extroverted, gregarious young people doing outreach were welcomed by most, but they could not cross all barriers with equal ease. For example, we still have to determine how to best help them overcome challenges with languages and cultures of which they were not a part, cope when their relative youth closes rather than opens doors, and support women who are not taken as seriously because of their gender.

It may also help to find people with strong community organizing backgrounds to do more canvassing and awareness building among groups that are underrepresented on the forums such as youth or business owners/employees. One of our outreach staff also suggested working with a team of people from the various communities to reach out within their own community.

KEY LEARNING

It is not yet clear whether the kind of people and skills we need in forum managers is something we can teach them, or whether we find people who already do that and invite them to be Forum Managers.

- It is very beneficial for outreach coordinators to meet together and with other staff within and between forums. That information and idea sharing, getting advice from peers, brainstorming, and problem solving can be invaluable and tangibly improves outcomes
- On all the new member sign-up forms, include optional questions about how people heard about the forum, why they are joining, some basic demographics, etc.; this would help measure outreach impacts, allow E-Democracy to know more about forum members, and provide insights people can use to help improve the forum
- When people ask to be removed from the forum, follow up to understand what's going on and remind them that their voice is important
- A Cedar-Riverside poster asked whether it is possible to send updates to forum members every so often letting them know the demographics of the forum members so that members can know who is in the forum; that's worth further consideration

An outstanding question related to all this is how E-Democracy engages paid people to get something starting and going, while at the same time builds capacity so we're not depending on paid outreach or forum support staff forever.

7.3 Forum Structure and Support

E-Democracy's underlying rules, structure, and management dramatically reduce the number, significance, and impact of problematic posts or posters. Specifically, our rules around civility and real names, trained forum managers, and protocols to quickly address problems help tremendously. The "community" of forum members also plays a key role in keeping forums healthy, although that is of course less present and tangible in any forum's early development.

As forums evolve we see that forum managers, local outreach staff, regular and active posters, and in some cases the E-Democracy executive director all have a role in helping "manage" the forum on the rare occasions when, for example, rumors get too far ahead of facts or there is some kind of forum or neighborhood crisis.

While we have limited experience on these two forums with anyone from E-Democracy having to formally intervene in a forum exchange, it has happened enough for us to recognize that as hosts we need to understand these phenomena better, become better prepared on multiple fronts, and likely develop more scenarios and guidance for key volunteers and staff.

As noted earlier in this report, it may be helpful to provide outreach staff with more information about the impact of their recruitment efforts, and also have outreach staff do some of the new member follow-up for those they recruited, allowing them to build on those positive relationships they established.

Our goal is to assure that forums continue to function and feel explicitly local, while also gently but firmly help them stay within the defined parameters of all E-Democracy forums.

7.4 Marketing the Forums

There's broad agreement about the need to better market E-Democracy and the forums.

- I think there needs to be information put out to the entire neighborhood that this thing exists. I don't think many people know about it. Maybe send a flyer to every house – just some way to tell people.
- For ongoing work, we need to "toot our own horn" more, noting that our forums are important – they are places where issues or topics first emerged; if we don't toot our own horn no one will do that for us.
- There is content out there – activities, photos, youth doing work, people telling the story of the neighborhood – but while that's happening all over there's no central place to talk about this…and each group wants to keep this information on their turf. We need to be that central place.

8 Moving Forward

Having already shared several lessons, the best insight gained from our intensive outreach and support in 2010 is a much deeper understanding of the potential of our neighborhood forums to increase civic engagement and accountability.

Neighbors told us the forum has provided them with new information and alternative viewpoints. We learned that elected officials pay attention to posts appearing on the forum, even if only a few post. Community organizations that found ways to actively participate found it relevant and rewarding. We believe all of this is a testament to the hard work of community members – those who participate in their forum and who volunteer to keep it healthy, respectful, supportive, and animated.

The range and depth of conversations on the forum is dependent on forum members' willingness to share their opinions, ask questions, and seek input from people of many backgrounds. Thought of another way, the success of the forum is circular, where the participation of all members sparks newer, far richer, and increased numbers of conversations, expanding the circle and emboldening all participants.

Finally, while this evaluation of our inclusion efforts in Frogtown and Cedar-Riverside is for 2010, E-Democracy continued to actively support these efforts in 2011 with a substantial additional grant from the Ford Foundation that deepened both our outreach and the sustainability of these forums. In 2012 we were awarded a major grant from the Knight Foundation to fund our three-year Inclusive Community Engagement Online initiative. Current information on all our work can be found at http://e-democracy.org/inclusion.