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## Opioid Crisis in Dayton: The Role of Facebook Comment Sections in Meaning-Making

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Opioid Crisis in Dayton: The Role of Facebook Comment Sections in Meaning-Making

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Humanities

By

Dylan Marie Colvin

B.A., Wright State University, 2015

2018

Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL

May 10, 2018

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Dylan Marie Colvin ENTITLED Opioid Crisis in Dayton: The Role of Facebook Comment Sections in Meaning-Making BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities.

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## ABSTRACT

Colvin, Dylan. Marie. M.Hum., Humanities Graduate Program, Wright State University, 2018. Opioid Crisis in Dayton: The Role of Facebook Comment Sections in Meaning-Making.

This thesis provides a foundational understanding of the ways in which Facebook is being used as a location for meaning making around the opioid epidemic in Dayton, Ohio. A content analysis of the *Dayton Daily News* Facebook page analyzes four posts that were randomly selected from 2017 and their corresponding 1,336 comments. This work will identify and describe discursive civility and incivility. This work adds to the growing conversation about incivility in political discourse by bringing the focus to the opioid epidemic and Facebook as a location where understandings of drug use and prevention are co-constructed. This construction, along with understandings of what is civil or uncivil, can both perpetuate and subvert power structures. The implications of this pilot study provide a framework to consider opportunities to create more civil and subversive locations on Facebook for meaning making.

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To Zach, I have loved you since we were barely teenagers. Tripping over our growing words and limbs on walks to nowhere and everywhere. You have not simply pushed me to grow, you have sustained me. I believe strongly in words ability to shape reality, but my love and respect for you doesn't yet have words to call home.

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Finally, to Dayton. I wake up every morning and read Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Toast to Dayton", "Love of home, sublimest passion that the human heart can know! Changeless still, though fate and fashion. Rise and fall and ebb and flow". Love for a place is a strange phenomenon. There is a section of US-35 West right before the Steve Whalen exit. From the highway you can see the Twin Towers, Historic Inner East, and Burkhardt neighborhoods. The average median income in that area is \$24,000. Those neighborhoods account for some the highest overdose rates. The old soap factory, long abandoned, has caught fire twice. Its bricks and twisted metal and charred wood are piled atop what was once a location that employed hundreds of Daytonian's that built the neighborhood. From the highway this looks like any other industrial town in the Midwest. Look closely and you'll catch a glimpse of the train underpass painted with pinks and oranges and blues and greens that always manage to catch light from dawn or dusk or passing cars. I can never look away from those colors. They are beautiful. They are complicated. This city feels hurt, confusion, anger, sadness. But our cries create masterpieces and innovate and inspire. I know of the sacrifice associated with becoming, because I am Dayton.



## I. Introduction

In the first quarter of 2017, Dayton EMS and police responded to nearly as many calls for accidental drug overdose as in the entirety of 2016. This is according to the ReCAST project grant proposal (2017) completed in conjunction with Dayton Police Department. In less than one month, from April 11<sup>th</sup>-May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Dayton saw 69 community members die from opioid use (ReCAST, 2017). In comparison to 2016 which saw 349 deaths, 2017 saw 559 community members die (PHDMC, 2017). Though heroin related deaths and overdoses are in decline, other opioids, fentanyl and carfentanyl, are filling that space. Fentanyl was cited in overdose deaths 107 times in 2015, 250 times in 2016, and 531 times (99% of cases) in 2017. (MCADAMHS, 2017). Media outlets such as, NBC, CNN, and an EPIX original documentary “America Divided” (2016) have all highlighted Dayton as a location for understanding of the national opioid epidemic. Dayton has become a hub in which meaning about the opioid epidemic is made and negotiated.

In media, such as Social Networking Sites (SNS), the epidemic is made visible. Using SNS, such as Facebook, the Dayton community participates in meaning making. Through posts, comments, and alphabetic and visual rhetoric, the community works to understand the opioid epidemic. This understanding is constructed through repeated representation

via posts and comments. Dayton Daily News is the only major newspaper in the Dayton area and currently has over 100,000 Facebook followers. In this context I analyze DaytonDaily News (DDN) Facebook posts and comments pertaining to the opioid crisis to uncover themes that arise as Facebook users comment and comment threads add to meaning making

I have three aims for this work: (1) to identify and describe discursive civility and incivility as it is manifested in DDN Facebook posts, comments, and comment threads about the opioid epidemic, (2) to describe and analyze ways in which discursive civility and incivility are used in the process of meaning making as the opioid epidemic of 2017 unfolded, and (3) theorize on the implications of Facebook as a location of meaning making. Through the evaluation of Facebook posts and comments, my objective is to gain an understanding of the use of Facebook in the production of public perception of the opioid epidemic. Additionally, I work to uncover how the opioid epidemic in Dayton is discussed to suggest tools to teach Facebook users effective social media communication that works to communicate positive and therapeutic ways of understanding this social event.

I am assessing how Facebook is used in collective meaning making about the opioid epidemic in the Dayton region. I chose Facebook based on a series of research supported factors. To begin, there is an immense popularity of and participation in Facebook. According the Pew Research Center, Facebook is the most popular social networking site (SNS) by a wide margin with 68% of U.S. adults (both internet using and non-internet using) on Facebook (2017). The next most popular SNS, Instagram, only has 28% of the population using their site. The Pew Research Center also found that older adults and

men are joining Facebook at higher rates than in previous years. Beyond growing in usership and popularity, Facebook users are also frequent users of the site; Pew Research Center found that 76% of American Facebook users visit the site on a daily basis. These numbers are evidence of Facebook's usefulness as a social utility. Facebook as a social utility means that it functions as a resource in which a majority of community members receive some sort of benefit from the service.

While Facebook numbers are growing print newspapers, like *DDN*, are relying on the internet to reach their audience. Engaging with the audience online can be understood as a direct action to address the steady decline of news consumption via print newspaper and steady increase of digital news consumption since 2002 (Pew, 2012). Individuals are using comments sections, typical in digital news, as a method of learning about their communities in communion with others, and newspapers are capitalizing on digital platforms to, "provide a new virtual public space for people to exchange ideas and opinions" (Santana 27). Facebook news sites utilize both a post and article to engage audiences.

The article links the user to the *DDN* website while the post engages with the user usually by asking for their opinion the content of the article. In this way comments and comment threads can be understood as "instant letters to the editor" (Waldman 2016). It is important to note that when a user clicks on the article link they may not be able to read the article, because the *DDN* website requires a paid digital subscription. I am looking at the comments left on the post as opposed to the comments left on the article, which would be located on the *DDN* website. Due to the nature of pay to view, I cannot verify that all users are able to read the entire article. As such, I can only surmise that

commenters base their comments on a set of resources unevenly distributed to the public such as; previous knowledge of the subject, post text, text of the linked article, the image, and other commenters.

Stuart Hall, noted cultural theorist, interrogates cultural products through his theory of encoding and decoding (2007). He asserts that when messages are produced they are encoded. When messages are received, the audience decodes the message. Through the construction process the producers of messages insert cultural values and signifiers that are encoded in the messages. The audience decodes these messages based on their social location and context. In this way, audience plays a central role in the process of both encoding and decoding. This is seen in the comment sections as commenters play a central role in the continued construction of the understanding of the original post. I am understanding the comments on *DDN* Facebook posts as a form of reproduction. Reproduction is the action, commenting; that results from decoding, reading, a produced text.

That reproduction adds to the collective knowledge and conversation about the epidemic. I assert that the comments, including the language choices made, is a form of social action. In Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff's work, "Genre in Linguistic Traditions: Systemic Functional and Corpus Linguistics", they assert that "language realizes social purposes and contexts as specific linguistic interactions, at the same time as social purposes and contexts realize language as specific social actions and meanings" (30). It is the symbiotic realizing between comments (the language) and social action (the knowledge that is co-constructed in the comment sections) that is of concern in this work.

Facebook is an example of a public genre site. Broadly, genre can be understood as “discursive formations used to carry out particular social activities” (“Genre Research”, Bawarshi and Reiff 151). Bawarshi and Reiff go on to situate public genres as locations in which “citizens produce information and seek to represent themselves and to construct relationships” (152). In the *DDN* Facebook comment sections citizens come together to represent their own values, learn about the values of their fellow citizens, and understand a variety of social events. This represents citizens actively taking part in social issues through discourse which can foster productive movement toward justice (civility). This discourse can also be a hindrance that disrupts the location for creative community constructed solutions (incivility). I analyzed over 1,000 comments left on *DDN* Facebook posts about the opioid epidemic to answer questions of how Facebook is used in the meaning making process as well as how civility and incivility play a role in that process?

## II. Foundations and Frameworks

This work aims to define and identify both incivility *and* civility within the comments sections of *DDN* Facebook page. This goal is informed through personal experience. I have been forced to confront the realities and roots of opioid use as I've watched friends, family, and the city I love experience the pains of opioids. I have been inspired by the resiliency and creativity that has blossomed from this rupture. An analysis of civility allows for a deeper understanding of meaning making within social media, an understanding not driven by fear of the platform, but by optimism of what it offers us. My sincere hope is that through this work I can provide insight into how Facebook can be used as a tool to intervene and resist any messages which refuse to acknowledge the material conditions which have worked to create this epidemic as well as perpetuate narratives of immoral identities.

### *Meaning Making*

The making of meaning produces, shifts, and negotiates understandings. In the comment sections, meaning making means that each comment participates in adding to collective knowledge or understanding of the social event of the opioid epidemic. This process is inextricably linked to systems of power. In "The Spectacle of the 'Other'" Stuart Hall defines power as "conditions of unequal relations...power also involves

knowledge, representation, ideas, cultural leadership and authority” (250). The ways in which Hall places power within the circularity of power is crucial for this work as it provides an example of the power the commenters have shift and control conversations not originally constructed by them.

To visualize the circularity of power think of a waterfall. The imagery that comes to mind is that of water falling from the top down. However, a waterfall is a circuit. As the water descends the fall and into the river it is evaporated by the sun and later condensed to fall back down as water to feed the waterfall. Even this system is more complex than a closed circuit with external inputs like human’s effect on climate change which drastically impacts the water cycle. This is a revolutionary and empowering concept. The waterfall (power) does not exist on its own. It requires input from open and fluid circuits which create and change it. Similarly, on Facebook powerful aren’t the sole creators and distributors of messages, and indeed they require those with less power to operate. In the comments sections commenters are a crucial part of the circuit of power.

Commenters stand firmly inside powers “field of operation”, the location in which discourses are argued and validated, with the ability to co-construct ideas outside of the post or articles original encoding. In the Facebook comment sections, the affordances and limitations of the genre narrow this field, “as participants orient towards this communicative social space they take on the mood, attitude, and actional possibilities of that place” (Bazerman 13). Language, culture, and meaning making happen in specific ways on Facebook as users negotiate how to utilize and operate the space.

Stuart Hall wrote about the complexity of language, culture, and meaning making in “The Work of Representation”. The importance of that piece to this work is that people

construct, through language, representations of society. Words bind representations of society we have available, and the words we have available are often bound by issues of power. These issues of power and language often manifest by reproducing terms that perpetuate inequality while attempting to resist the same inequality. Take for example the ways in which some Facebook users speak of someone who uses/misuses opioids. Words such as “addict”, “user”, “junkie”, and “those people” can be seen in every comment thread examined including comments that advocate for care and compassion.

Words that ‘other’ are a common representation of a person with substance misuse disorder. By replacing the multiple identities of the person with a single phrase that usurps the rest of their being, this language works to stigmatize. The words perpetuated by dominant culture, whether used in support of or opposition to individuals, are a threat to the meaning making process. This threat occurs because stigmatizing terms or phrases are often understood irrespective of and prior to an individual’s status. Which is to say that stigmatizing phrases begins with the assumption that a behavior is ‘other’ and that in turn limits the potential meanings. Yet, I assert that working through those words via comment sections can be a powerful subversive tool that repositions meaning.

### *Civility and Incivility*

Civility and incivility is inherently social in nature. In researching civility and incivility, I found that incivility was the focus of published research predominantly coming from the field of communication. That research laid a foundation for thinking about and coding incivility but left something to be desired when thinking of civility. A simple antonym did not do justice to what I was witnessing in the comments. After coding I turned to the works of educational psychologist Dr. Zopito Marini. His



commitment to community falls in line with my work and my understanding of civility developed through the coding of Facebook comments. Marini asserts that, “civility can be defined as the ability to act as a ‘citizen’ of a group and function in a positive manner so that individual engagement can benefit both the individual and the group” (61).

Importantly, that definition of civility moves from what characteristics of the language of civility looks like. Instead, it offers insight into how the language of civility produces actions that an engaged citizenry participates in, such as sustained commentary, comments that stake claims, and comments that analyze social situations.

Civility is essential in deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy necessitates discourses which requires the use of claims, analysis, and evidence to drive a narrative that can be used for argumentation and persuasion. In Dayton, Ohio The Kettering Foundation is nationally recognized for their collaborative research that focuses around the question, “what does it take to make democracy work as it should?” (*The Kettering Foundation*). They identify a set of practices that should be employed in order for citizens that may disagree to come to a common understanding and take action around a shared problem. These practices are part of a deliberative process that SNS provide a platform for. For example, they identify collective learning as a key component of democracy. On Facebook, collective learning is not only possible, but is encouraged through the formatting of posts and comments that encourage interaction.

As with meaning making it is important to consider the role of power within civility and incivility. Marini states that, “incivility can slowly undermine the necessary social fabric needed for group function” (64). Beyond the high overdose rates and deaths, the opioid epidemic is of concern in Dayton because of the long-term impacts to group

function such as public health concerns and an increase of children in foster care. Many in the public health and nonprofit education and prevention community, myself included, believe that the lack of discussion about the realities of the epidemic resulted in delayed action in terms of prevention and education as well as delay in distribution of resources to combat the epidemic.

### *Digital Media and Stigmatized Identities*

Narratives of immoral identities, because the result of incivility in the comments sections is the stigmatization and flattening of identity. On the other hand, civility in the comments sections results in a humanization and recognition of intersections of identities. The comment sections produce social action both within digital and non-digital spaces as the users of Facebook exist not just as a figure on a digital platform, but community members that are neighbors, teachers, voters, and so on.

This social action includes a process of meaning-making that is a component in the formation of identity and community. Identity and community develop online as both a product of political discourse as well as through thoughtful creation by users as they travel through the internet outside of their typical networks of association. James Zappen begins to explore this in his work, “Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory”. He writes that studies of digital media show that the use, purpose, and outcomes of digital media in communicating works not only to move “audiences to action or belief, but also as self-expression for the purpose of exploring individual and group identities and participation and creative collaboration for the purpose of building communities of shared interests” (322). In this work Facebook comments are understood as a location

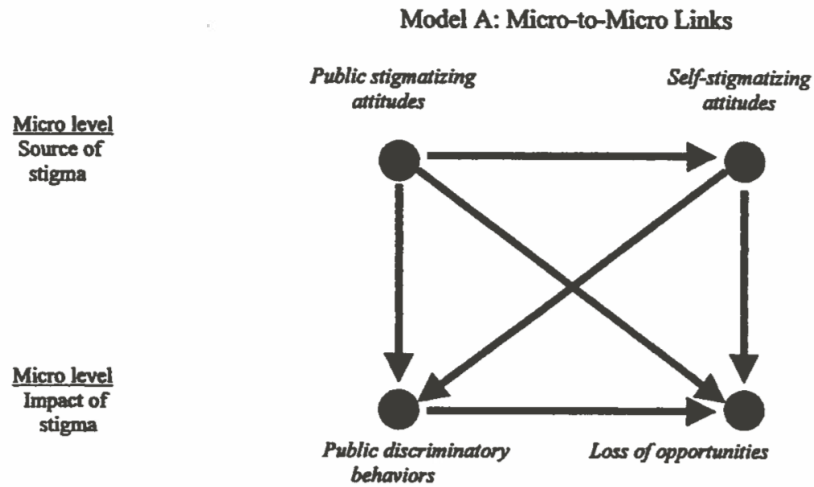
where dialogue is collaboratively created to form content outside the post and article that develops our understandings of communities and identities.

It is in this collaboration in the Facebook comment sections that power shifts into focus for this work. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and goes on to emphasize that “it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another” (3). Within the Facebook comment sections, the use of stigmatizing language works to make separations between Facebook users and to separate the Facebook users from the content. The context of the situation, which includes the platform of the discourse, is key as to whether a labeled attribute is stigmatized. This connection of incivility to stigmatization is key, because it points to a link between the comments sections and the embodied experiences of individuals and communities.

This link represents the power of public meaning making. Take, for example, the theory below from “Structural Levels of Mental Illness Stigma and Discrimination” by Patrick W. Corrigan et al., in which public stigmatizing attitudes (comment sections) affect self-stigmatizing attitudes which in turn lead to public discriminatory behaviors and loss of opportunities (or life chances). In the comment sections public attitudes on opioid use are negotiated, providing a space to come to what Arjan Bos describes as public stigma in which “consensual understanding that a social attribute is devalued” (2). In the *DDN* Facebook comments on the opioid epidemic, this sort of consensual understanding of the social event causes reactions such as, “public anger, anxiety, sympathy, fear, avoidance, and social exclusion” (Bos 3). Stigmatization and the

structure of forms of civility in the comment sections highlight the power of consensual and co-constructed understandings of the epidemic.

**Figure 1. Macro and micro levels of analysis in mental illness stigma and discrimination**



*Figure 1*

Traditional rhetoric is usually understood for its use in persuasion. However, Zappen states that the goal of rhetoric is, “creative collaboration for the purpose of building communities of shared interest” (321). Zappen contends that this version of dialogue goes beyond persuasion and instead is a “testing of one’s own ideas, a contesting of others’ ideas, and a collaborative creating of ideas” (320). He writes that this dialogue can be oral, but that the internet allows this dialogue to move quickly reaching a wide and interactive audience (321).

Zappen’s writing on digital rhetoric highlights the ways in which the use of digital news and comment sections in SNS may inadvertently cause, what specialists in mass communication refer to as, a spiral of silence. As negative comments pile atop each other

a shared interest begins to form in the community, and according to the spiral of silence theory first developed in the 1970's by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, collaboration becomes more difficult. Communication and public relations specialists, Dr. Moon J Lee and Dr. Jung Won Chun considered the spiral of silence as well as the opportunity for a spiral of empowerment. The spiral of silence created in social media comments creates an environment in which "individual's perceptions of majority public opinion influence their willingness to speak out" (479). The spiral of silence can function as a mechanism for the preservation of power imbalances, as the negative comments do the work of structurally supporting any institutions which benefit from and perpetuate moral regulation through self and group regulation of behavior. On the other hand, the spiral of empowerment allows for increased participation and comprehensions of events.

#### *Comment Sections on Facebook*

Comments and comment threads can be understood as what Steven Waldman calls "instant letters to the editor" (2016). This type of engagement changes the way readers understand the original post. In this real time engagement with the news, "user comments can be consequential for how site visitors interpret the information that precedes them. Uncivil comments, for instance, can result in attitude polarization" (Stroud 189). Lee and Chung also find that the comment sections is a place for meaning making. Lee and Chung write, "In social media, a small group of people can easily create an appearance of positive and negative public opinions toward a particular issue/organization" (480). A perceived negative public opinion creates a cycle of stigmatization and fear. Lee and Chung write that, "the core argument is that individuals are less likely to speak out, due to fear of isolation [from others in the community], when

they perceive their opinions differ from the majority opinion” (480). The spiral of silence theory could suggest that persons with substance misuse disorders are not the only target of negative public opinion, but that anyone who may support harm reduction techniques is at risk, even if it is just a perceived risk, of losing community connections.

By considering social media within the spiral of silence, as well as the spiral of empowerment theory laid out by Moon J. Lee and Jung Won Chun I will also identify ways in which social media can be a location for resistance of hegemonic narratives. In response to the spiral of silence, the spiral of empowerment considers how users of social media are able to bond with individuals outside of their traditional reference groups (family, friends, neighbors). The Spiral of Silence theory suggests that individuals use clues from their environment to gauge public perception on an issue. Fear of isolation causes can silence individuals who do not see their point of view represented. And while comments can happen quickly on social media site there is also a door open to diverse ideas outside ones established social network which may often be inaccessible outside SNS. This means that on Facebook citizens can be exposed to a wider variety of claims and understandings. A recognition in the importance of the Spiral of Silence and Spiral of Empowerment is key when identifying moments of civility and incivility in the comment sections.

### *Civility and Incivility Online*

As technologies changes how we live, learn, work, and play they continuously transform the methods, genres, and formats through which we understand the world around us and our place in it. This work focuses on how the genre of publicly accessible Facebook pages produce comments that influences how collective understandings are

produced. Through a focus on the opioid epidemic I will seek to provide a foundation from which actionable data can be produced to influence civility in the comment sections. This idea of civility coupled with incivility provides insight into how user comments on Facebook pages that are visible to the public can influence how collective understandings of issues are produced. It allows for a focus on the ways in which the genre of Facebook comments is social interaction. While incivility and civility has become more well researched as it relates to social media, this work emphasizes the role power plays in the discussion of civility and incivility.

An interrogation of Facebook as a site of meaning making requires understanding Facebook as a genre. Rhetorician Amy J. Devitt writes that, “genre necessarily encompasses form as part of the fusion of form, substance, and action” (27). In the case of this project the genre is Facebook and the social action produced is analyzed in the form of comments and comment threads. The substance of the comments is directly tied to the form of the comment, where readers of a post can directly comment on the original post and engage in discussion with other readers. In the case of Facebook comments concerning the opioid epidemic in Dayton incivility was clearly shown through stigmatizing language and phrases while civility is understood through its social function and form. In other words, civility is understood “for its role in facilitating constructive deliberation, including its effect on people’s willingness to consider and adopt another point of view” (Santana 20). Through understanding Facebook as a genre, we can begin to see how the format of a comment reflects civility as affordances and limitations of the genre of Facebook produce specific forms of social action. The form of the comment is the social impact.

Characteristics of the form of civility in the genre of Facebook includes many of the aspects looked for in a well-researched paper. Civility should be 1) part of a conversation on a topic with some relevancy to people's lives, 2) based and displayed in a way that privileges a format that includes claims and analysis. This claims, evidence, and analysis format is important as it relates to civility in comment sections because, "participation in deliberative forums has been shown to increase knowledge, create stronger links between knowledge and attitudes, and increase familiarity with different views" (Stroud 190). In the same way, this work seeks to identify and describe civility for its ability to connect Facebook users to sources, resources, and new understandings.

Civility can be understood for its qualities related to not only a respect for the individual, but for its commitment to engagement with a wide variety of values and ideas. Incivility however, leads to a breakdown in conversation and a solidification of previous held beliefs. In "Civility vs. Incivility in Online Social Interactions: An Evolutionary Approach" authors Angelo Antoci et al. look at civility and incivility in ways that relate not only to the Spiral of Silence and Spiral of Empowerment, but also to issues of the social action that results from a Facebook comment sections. The affordances that Facebook provides, speed, reach, *relative* anonymity, and a diversified form of interaction allows users to, "not only learn and adopt successful strategies for using the site, but also to condition their own behavior on that of others" (1). In this way, users are acquainted with (or learn) the conventions and affordances of Facebook which translates to Spirals (of silence or empowerment) as others attempt argumentation through the confines of the sites abilities and the user's expectations. This will be further explored in the discussion as the effectiveness of long comments are explored for their impact on the



meaning making process. Online civility should not be understood as politeness (Papacharissi). Rather it should be understood for its characteristics that enable it to (theoretically) communicate effectively a message to a wide audience that comprises the more expansive reference group that Facebook allows for.

Antoci describes incivility online as, “a manner of offensive interaction that can range from aggressive commenting in threads, incensed discussion and rude critiques, to outrageous claims, hate speech, and harassment” (1). This definition fits closely with other definitions on incivility online (Coe, Papacharissi, Santana, Stroud, Lim). During the open coding stage, I found that incivility online was easily identifiable not as much by form, as was the case for civility, but instead by specific word choices and phrases which provided hasty assertions directed at individuals as opposed to institutional structures.

### *Questions and Purpose*

In “Framing Analysis” Erving Goffman writes, “My aim is to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject” (10). I ask how understanding of the opioid epidemic in Dayton is made through the organizational genre of Facebook. As Bazerman suggests the frameworks with which Facebook users enter a public Facebook page frames the role civility and incivility play in the co-creation of understanding, and finally what can be learned about how the characteristics of Facebook impact the building of social communities. *DDN* is the largest news source in the area. Their massive reach allows for them to play an active and central role in framing the opioid epidemic. The form of Facebook allows for users to reinforce the frame or reframe the narrative.

### III. Method

The *Dayton Daily News (DDN)* Facebook page represents the social media arm of Dayton and Montgomery County's only daily print newspaper. Over 180,000 people follow the page which is 30,000 more people than the population of the city. *DDN* is owned by the Cox Media group which also owns the local news television station, WHIO Channel 7, as well as local radio stations. Cox Media ownership of both *DDN* and WHIO allows them to account for the largest social media following of news sites in Montgomery County. It is for this reason that the *DDN* Facebook site was selected as a purposeful sample for this pilot study.

#### *Content Analysis*

Although discourse or genre analysis could have been used in this work, content analysis was selected for its ability to identify common representations of the opioid epidemic as well as challenges to the narrative. By looking at the entirety of the text as well as highlighting specific moments of civility and incivility within the comment sections I work to gain an understanding of how Facebook users are entering a public discussion thus participating in community building and understanding. The public nature of the *DDN* Facebook page allows for engaged discussion, which I assert is a form of community building. Indeed, it is an essential aspect of a deliberative democracy in which community discussions and deliberations are the primary building block of a

democratic social order. Facebook commenters engagement with the post produces a new text, and with that new meaning, to analyze.

Patricia Leavy describes the affordances of content analysis writing, “we can learn about our society by interrogating the material items produced within the culture...we can learn about social life, such as norms, values, socialization, or social stratification by looking at the texts we produce, which reflect macrosocial processes and our worldview” (229). This work allows for an examination of co-produced texts, in which comments are the texts produced. The texts produced about the opioid epidemic in Dayton allow me to examine questions about the nature of civility and incivility as it manifests on Facebook and how Facebook impacts meaning making. Comments were taken from a public Facebook page and as such IRB approval for this work was verified by my university’s IRB board as not required.

I am using Carlos Castillo’s piece, “Characterizing the Life Cycle of Online News Stories Using Social Media Reactions” as rationale for taking only the comments made within the first 20 hours after the article is posted. Castillo analyzes the shelf life of reactions to social media news stories. Shelf life looks at the total attention a post will receive to calculate the point in which responses to a post reach saturation. The findings showed that the shelf life of a news article is 8 hours and 20 hours for in-depth articles (9). Both in-depth and news articles are represented making a 20-hour mark most applicable to my research. However, since posts were not collected in real time I must rely on the time stamp on Facebook meaning that 24 hours is the most accurate time marker I can attain.

## *Data*

News organizations frequently post articles to Facebook about a variety of topics throughout the day. Because this work focuses on the opioid epidemic I used “search for posts on this page” function on Facebook to search for *DDN* posts with the key words, “fentanyl”, “carfentanyl”, “opioid/opiate”, and “heroin”. These words were chosen as they directly relate to and reflect the substances that are driving the opioid epidemic. This search feature allowed for me to find those key terms both in the title of the article and the corresponding post that *DDN* creates.

The search feature provides a random selection not ordered by date, rate of response, or any other engagement considerations other than the inclusion of the keywords. The result of my selection search was 65 total posts with 3,310 total comments. I only considered posts from 2017 as the year marked a national interest in Dayton’s opioid epidemic. Each of those posts were catalogued and their number of comments were tracked. To be considered for inclusion as a part of this study, a post had to have 100 or more comments. This was done in to have a robust data set to work with which reflected maximum community engagement. Of the 65 *DDN* posts, 11 had over 100 comments. These 11 posts accounted for 2,544 of the 3,310 comments during the data collection time period. This means that the 11 posts accounted for 77% of the total comments. This percentage is evidence of a heightened engagement for these posts.

From there I employed a random number generator to select 4 posts with a total of 1,336 comments. Of those, comments that fit certain profiles were removed from consideration which brought the total comments to be analyzed to 1,231. Comments removed included: those after the life cycle cut off 24 hours; spam; trolls; double

postings; a post that only tagged a person; a post to correct spelling; or a post with a single word agreement in response to the post. For this work I determined what constituted a “troll” during the open coding phase. Trolls are typically identified as users who tend to take measures to remain anonymous while engaging in a specific form of incivility that purposefully works to disseminate false information, trigger fellow site users, and antagonize.

I identified seven instances of trolls which I defined by their attempts at anonymity (characters or other objects as their profile pictures) along with the content of their post. The trolls I identified use the same exact comment throughout the post which is many paragraphs long. To be considered a troll there had to be a complete lack of engagement on the post, no comment thread or likes. For example, an instance of trolling I identified and didn't code was a multi-paragraph commentary on building a wall between the United States and Mexico. It appeared more than once in the comments and had no engagement. On the other hand, there was a typical example of a troll which I did include as it did produce engagement. The name and profile picture both referenced the devil. The comment was simply a picture of Charles Darwin. This comment produced a comment thread that in which some commenters agreed with the OP, but others provided links to sites that explained the theory of natural selection. This comment was coded as the engagement with it added to the deliberative process of meaning making.

Below are two tables. The first identifies the four posts included in my sample. The table displays the article title, the post text, the post image, the date it was posted, the total comments, and a description of the components of the post. The second table describes operational definitions of the comments coded. During an open coding stage, I

read each comment five times during which a preliminary framework emerged with which to understand how Facebook users are engaging with the information provided on the opioid epidemic. As codes began to emerge I began axial and selective coding to identify major themes and operational definitions of claims/analysis, responses to claims/analysis, opinion: solution, evidence, aspersion, pejorative of speech, threats of violence, and stigma. While incivility is understood mainly through word and phrase choices, civility is understood specifically as a form that manifests within the limitations and affordances of Facebook. This form is a foundation of civil conversation as it moves participants closer to an engagement which allows for understanding of others point of view, the ability to question and analyze their own point of view and consideration of outside sources in order to make meaning about a societal event.

### *Posts*

After a limit of free articles per month per user are read the *DDN* makes users pay for access to their digital content. This means that many users may only be able to comment based solely on the post content, article title, and post image, not the entirety of the article. The articles linked in posts one, three, and four deals with policy issues. The article linked in post two qualifies as an in-depth article, one that provides a robust analysis of the social event of the opioid epidemic. Since many users may not have access to the full article a link to an in-depth piece may be more difficult to engage with. Posts one and three references policies put in place by a suburb (1) and town (3) within the Dayton metro area. Post four requires additional context beyond an identification as a policy post. The post article, “Whaley proposes surcharge for pain killers to fight opioid

crisis”, refers to Dayton democratic mayor, Nan Whaley. During the time of this post Mayor Whaley had announced her intention to run for governor of Ohio.

Posts

Table 1

| Article<br>Number/ Title   | Post Text   | Post Image   | Date Posted        | Total<br>Comments |
|--|---|--|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1) “Miamisburg resumes charges for those who overdoes on Drugs”  | “Does Dayton need to do the same?”  | White hand holding a syringe   | March 10<br>2017   | 316               |
| 2) “Opioids, a mass killer we’re meeting with a shrug”   | “About as many Americans are expected to die this year of drug overdoses as died in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars combined” | Vivitrol box with two vials and a syringe  | June 23 2017       | 116               |
| 3) “ ‘ We’re not going to use Narcan’: Sheriff is second Butler County official to question overdose response” | “Do you agree?”   | Butler County Sheriff sitting in front of a large Butler County Sheriff wall hanging | July 7 2017        | 456               |
| 4) “Whaley proposes surcharge for pain killers to fight  | “Is this a good idea?”  | Nan Whaley in front of a black backdrop  | October 18<br>2017 | 448               |



|                   |  |                         |  |  |
|-------------------|--|-------------------------|--|--|
| opioid<br>crisis” |  | and<br>American<br>flag |  |  |
|-------------------|--|-------------------------|--|--|

*Grounded Theory Coding*

I use a grounded theory coding approach adapted from *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss. Through this method I develop eight codes, listed below. I narrowed these codes down from 14 codes that emerged in the beginning. I merged codes based on the commonalities that became apparent through meaning saturation in which additional insights became less likely to be produced. Two codes, personal narrative and personal narrative response, merged into the claims/analysis and claims/analysis response. The codes of personal narrative and personal narrative response used emotional and ethical appeals to encourage empathy and understanding in the thread. These appeals are tools of the claims and analysis structure as well as the response structure, and thus were merged into those codes. My focus on claims and analysis developed through considering the ways in which civil discourse is essential to the success of a community. Civil discourse necessitates forming of content substantial enough to push for social action.

*Operational Definitions*

Table 2

| Code                                  | Definition   | Example   |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Claims/Analysis                       | A comment that put forth a position and/or belief. This often includes analyzing the issue through an understanding or interrogation of ways that the issue impacts other matters. | Q1 5<br>“Literally ALL the research on this shows that treatment, not jail, works. Despite what you might have been told, drug addicts are still people. They can, and do recover. But please, lets fill up our prisons with non-violent drug offenders.”                             |
| Claims/Analysis Response              | Engagement with a parent comment that added additional claims, analysis, evidence, or resources.   | Q1 2A<br>“I agree. A few I have witnessed on herion, hit That low. Ended up n jail n it was just enough to wak them up, seek help and resume a normal life. I don’t like the idea of crowding the jail systems. Although something has to give n be done to help save a life or two.” |
| Opinion: Solution                     | Offering of a solution to the issues in the article, post, or issues brought up in the comment thread.   | Q3 5<br>“Law Enforcement... in my opinion should assess the situation and call the EMS.”  |
| Evidence                              | A presentation of data, sources, experiences, and examples that support claims and analysis.   | Q3 5c<br>“That’s not how narcan works according to project Dawn. Also Ohio law was changed so that any assistor who calls 911 or uses narcan won’t be charged.”   |
| Aspersions (Adapted from Coe, et al.) | Language or comments that are aggressive or  | Q4 9A   |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | devalue behaviors or identities.  | “Because Demonrats are sheeple.”   |
| Pejorative of Speech<br>(Adapted from Coe, et al.) | Language or comments that devalue or attacks the ways a person communicates.                              | Q2 23A<br>“Are you really that stupid? The wall would stop all illegal drugs? Yea, right...”   |
| Threats of Violence                                | Language or comments that threatens or alludes to physical or emotional harm toward a person or identity. | Q2 7<br>“Population control. The strong shall survive. The weak will destroy themselves leaving the cream of the crop.”  |
| Stigma   | Language or comments that separate “us” from “them”. (Link and Phelan)                                    | Q4 2<br>“Medicine is already to expensive and she wants to tax the legal users to pay for the cost of illegal users? They tend to lump everyone together, good people and bad people are all the same so charge the good people for the “right” to use what bad people abuse.” |

Aspersions, pejorative of speech, threats of violence, and stigma are all clear forms of incivility. These forms of language and comments derail the possibilities for a social meaning making that engages in deliberative democracy. Social meaning making is a crucial step towards subversive and empowering understandings of culture, events, and space. While comments that devalue ideas can be understood for their qualities of subversion, comments that devalue identities or behavior are clearly understood as uncivil. My most engaging findings have been that of the possibilities for civil conversation. Civility is understood as it is formed in claims and analysis, responses, opinion: solution, and evidence all of which provide room for individuals to perform active citizenry. While each of these forms of civility also provide opportunities for uncivil language, their potential for social change and action is a form of civility.

#### IV. Findings

When I began coding I expected to see a clear distinction between comments with characteristics of incivility and comments with characteristics of civility. Instead comments offered far more fluidity in substance, form, and language. Many of these comments highlight a willingness to engage in a topic that represents a material experience for individuals and material reality for the city. Some comments were coded only as an uncivil code (aspersion, pejorative, violence, stigma). However, others have been coded with both an uncivil code and as civil code.

It was the realization that comments inhabited a multiplicity of characteristics that drove me to use a pseudonym for every comment. Commenters do not technically have an expectation of privacy on a public page. Nonetheless, I believe that by upholding anonymity I am allowing myself to understand each comment within the context of the full text of comments rather than judging individual commenters. The following comment from post one is an example of the ability for one comment to represent both civility and incivility.

“Treatment works for some...the ones who are just tired of the drug lifestyle and want to be clean and sober. All those I’ve seen start to get clean for any other reason have all relapsed. It doesn’t help that programs like Project CURE and Sojourner are in Western Manor and DeSoto Bass, respectively...just 2

complexes that are heaven for addicts.” (Q1 5zg)

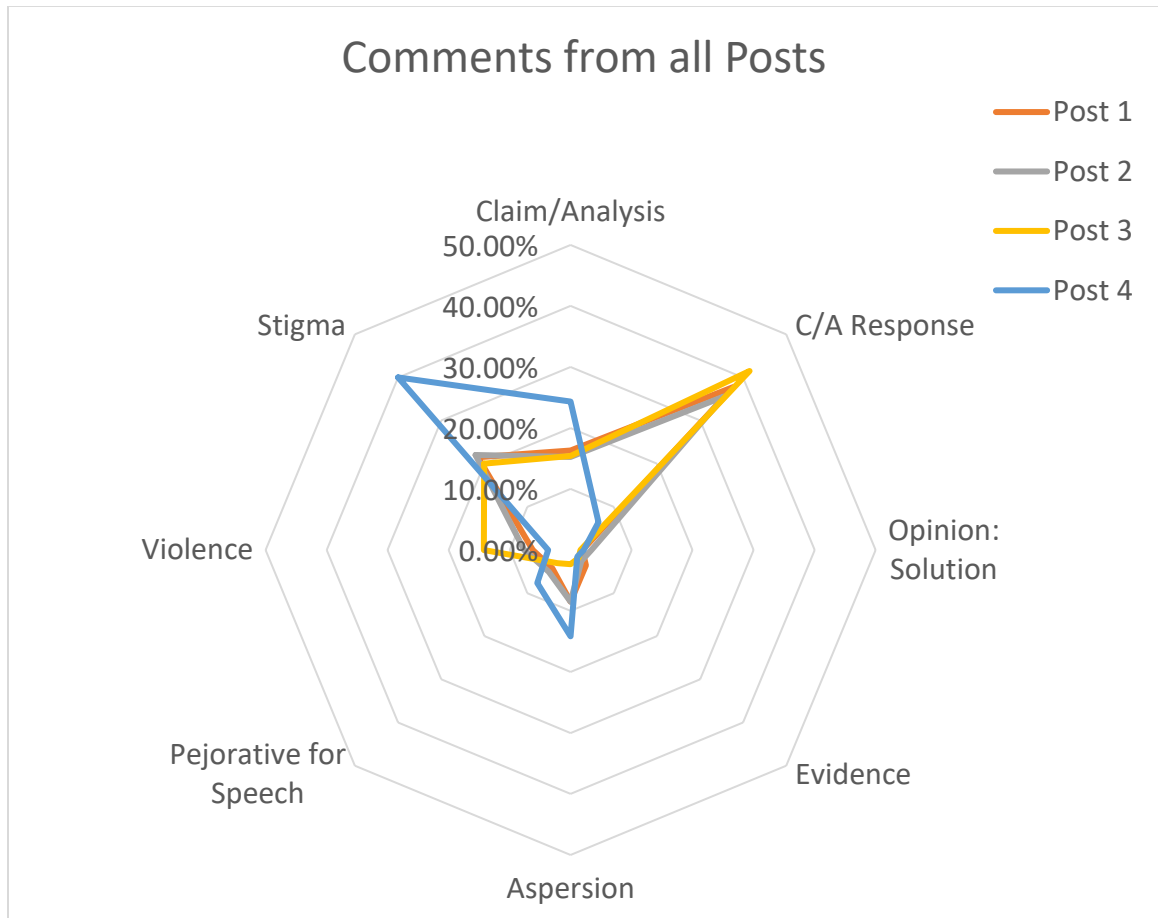
This post represents both a claim/analysis response as well as stigmatization. Commenter Q1 5zg engages with the original claim and analysis, suggesting that locations of rehabilitation programs are not beneficial to sobriety. This claim is an interesting one that brings up issues of accessibility. However, their claim about the circumstances of individuals sustained sobriety is conjecture with no evidence or analysis with which to create a foundation for the claim. Their comment on the Western Manor and DeSoto Bass being a “heaven for addicts” is stigmatizing. It flattens the identity of a person with substance misuse disorder to only that of their disease. Further, unlike diseases deemed socially acceptable the terminology of “addict” works to separate those with substance misuse disorder from the rest of the community. Link and Phelan explain the stigmatizing nature of this sort of language use asserting that, “Incumbents are thought to “be” the thing they are labeled” (370). In the case of this work it is the difference between someone having an addiction and someone being an addict. The language of “addicts” is a language of devaluation and a statement on morality.

The language being used is further complicated by their identification of the neighborhoods of Western Manor and DeSoto Bass. Western Manor and DeSoto Bass are both located in West Dayton. Both are section 8 housing. Western Manor has a 98.5% Black population and DeSoto Bass has a 95.8% Black population (Statistical Atlas 2015). Associating locations that provide housing for Black Daytonians and some of the most impoverished people in our community with heroin use works to stigmatize and devalue not only identities, but also behaviors and spaces. Despite the attributes of incivility, commenter Q1 5zg does display characteristics of engagement that are necessary for civil

discourse's ability to shape a community. I avoid coding based on effectiveness, but instead based on characteristics of claims, analysis, evidences, and opinions that allow for responses which lay foundations for sustained engagement. This sustained engagement assists in civility as it both aids an individual's working through of concepts and supports a co-knowledge production.

I work to both identify incivility and civility while recognizing these concepts as a continuum in which people negotiate conventions of Facebook as well as communally negotiate acceptable understandings of societal events. I have formatted the tables below in a specific visual manner to represent that commitment. This table provides a representation of the findings in which comments each post are pulled to different moments of civility and incivility. Visually it asks the reader to understand the fluidity of the comment sections in which a single comment can inhabit a variety of codes. This table speaks to the complexity of analyzing the texts of comments and comment threads.

*Comments from all Posts*



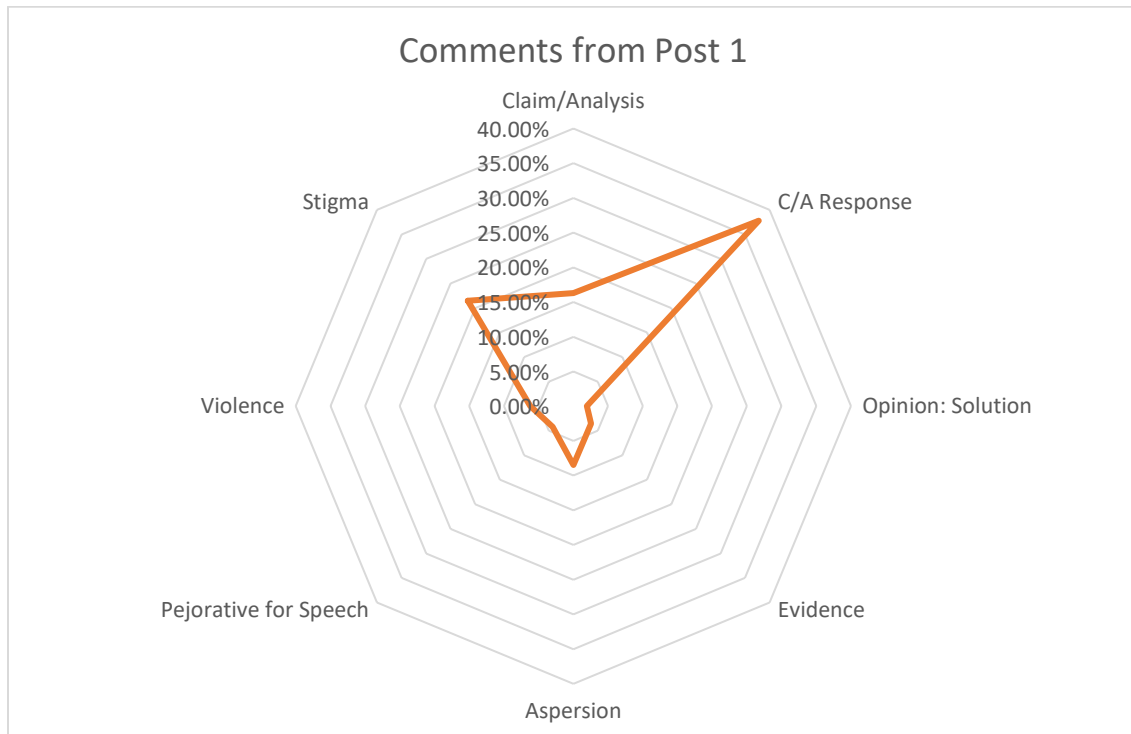
*Figure 2*

This first table represents the results from each post. Looking at the posts from this angle it becomes clear that Post 4 is the outlier, containing more stigma and aspersion than the other three. Post 4 deals with current mayor, former gubernatorial candidate, Nan Whaley. The amount of incivility, especially stigma and aspersion, in that post presents interesting questions about the role that local politics plays in perceptions of the opioid epidemic. It is clear from this table that offerings of solutions and evidence is far less



likely than any other action. Further research should consider if and how the limitations and social conventions of Facebook as a genre may influence the lack of solutions and evidence presented.

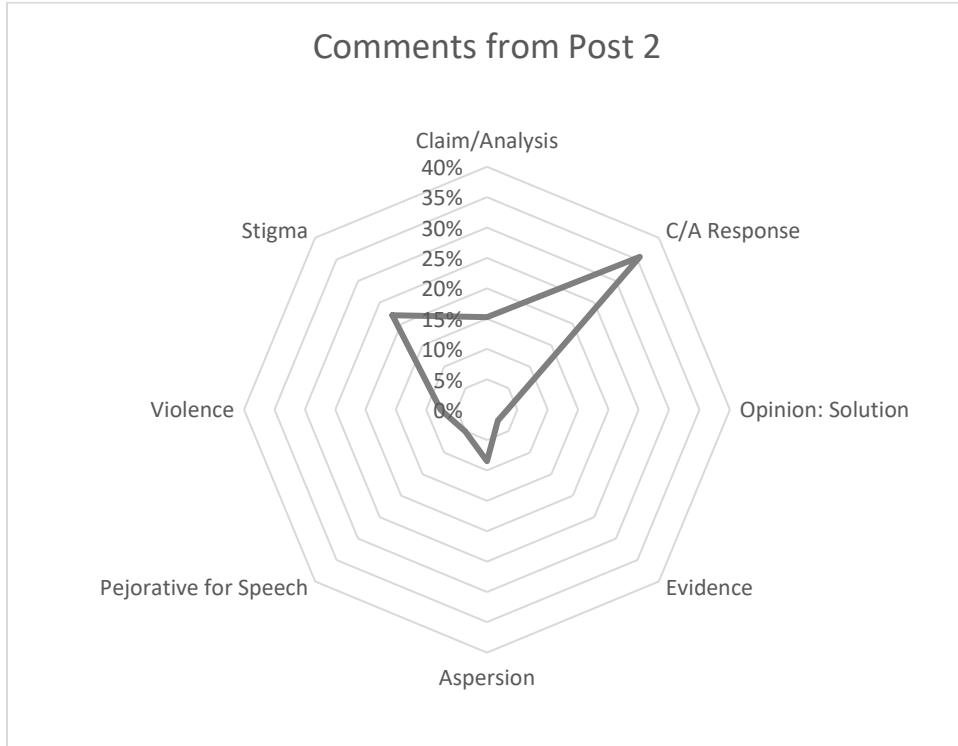
*Comments from Post One*



*Figure 3*

Post One contained 316 comments. It asked the reader if Dayton should follow a nearby suburb's lead and start charging those who overdose. This post sees a high response to claims ratio. 16.3% of comments were commenters stating a claim or analysis, while 37.8% of comments represent an engagement with those claims or analysis. This shows a relatively high engagement rate as each response to a claim or analysis represents a response to a parent comment, the original comment posted that began the comment thread. Similarly, to posts 2 and 3, Post 1 has nearly a 60/40 ratio of civility to incivility. Post One also has two comment threads that represents spirals of empowerment, which can be seen in the content of comment threads, that will be analyzed in the discussion.

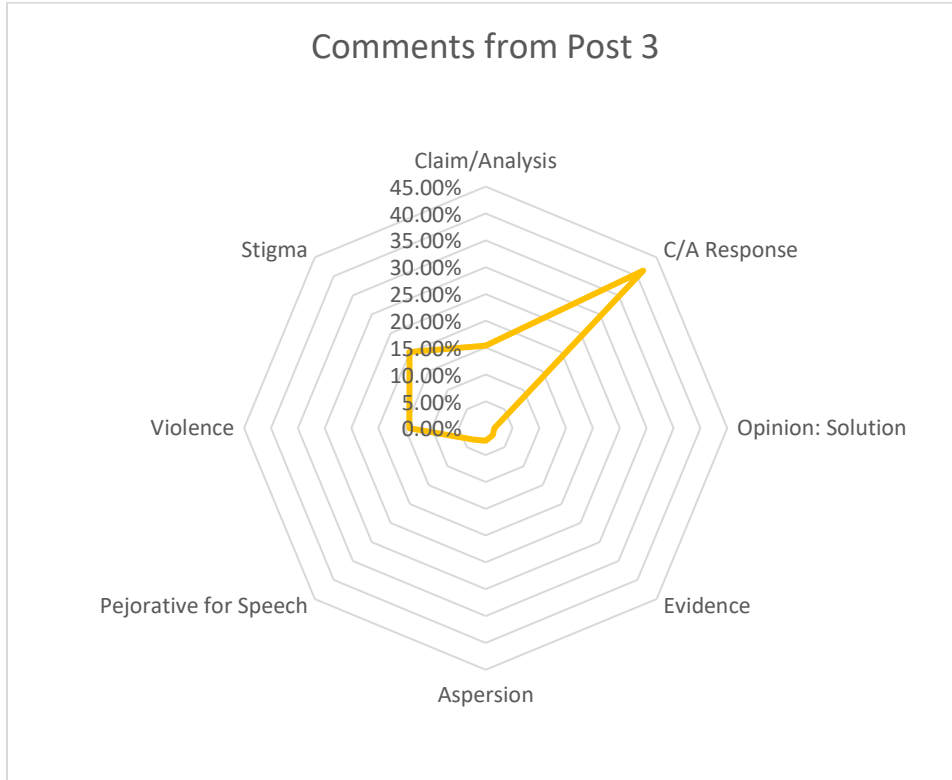
*Comments from Post Two*



*Figure 4*

Post Two is presented as an in-depth news piece. The article title states a claim, that the opioid epidemic is being met with a shrug. The post provides an analysis of that claim, contextualizing the amount of death with the numbers of those who have died in war. Interestingly, despite advertising an in-depth look at the opioid crisis, this post provided the least amount of comments with only 116 total comments. I will further analyze this detail in the discussion.

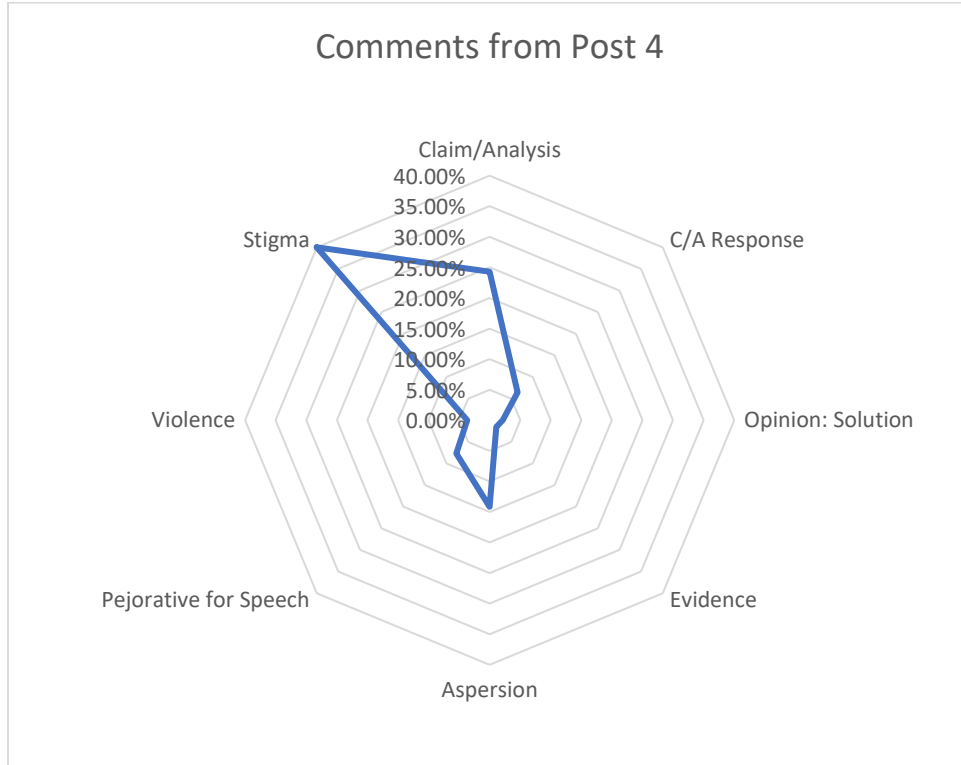
*Comments from Post Three*



*Figure 5*

Post Three contains the story of an area county police chief who has told his department and the county they serve that their department will no longer use Narcan, a lifesaving drug that can reverse the effects of an overdose. The post asks readers if they agree with his decision. This post has the largest amount of comments as well as the longest comment thread, which is a sustained conversation left after a single parent comment. This comment thread accounts for 103 of the 456 comments. This post also houses the largest amount of threats of violence, with the discussion of Narcan often turning to commenters suggesting that those overdosing should be left to die. Both the comment thread and threats of violence will be the focus point of the discussion.

*Comments from Post Four*



*Figure 6*

Post Four links to an article which reveals Mayor Nan Whaley’s proposal to impose a surcharge on pain killers. The post asks readers if they believe this move is a good idea. This post contains an increased amount of incivility. While the other posts all have about a 60/40 ratio of engagement with civility/incivility, Post Four only has an engagement with civility of 34.46%, with the remaining 65.8% representing incivility. Although much of the vitriol was directed at Nan Whaley or at commenter’s political affiliations as indicators of their intelligence or morality, those comments shifted the tone of the post away from discussing the solution proposed by Nan Whaley.

## V. Discussion: A Move to a Roundtable

“Conocimiento shares a sense of affinity with all things and advocates mobilizing, organizing, sharing information, knowledge, insights, and resources with other groups...why not use pain as a conduit to recognize another’s suffering, even that of the one who inflicted the pain.”

Gloria Anzaldua (153)

Cultural theorist, rhetorician, feminist, and queer philosopher Gloria Anzaldua is celebrated for her works ability to make a place between the borders of academic, political, and personal. I follow her by opening this section with her words that have provided guidance and influenced my work. Her concept of “conocimiento” (knowledge) has been a beacon during the production of my work. Opening the discussion with her words is designed to heal, writer and reader, as this work continues. Four posts created by a mid-sized city newspapers Facebook page generated over 1,000 comments.

The act of closely reading and analyzing those comments was embodied in ways I could have never imaged. I will carry with me for the rest of my life the story of a mother whose son was on a waiting list for an in-patient rehab center when his organs failed due to drug use. He died in hospice care as his mother and father kissed his hands and arms, unable to kiss his face that was obstructed by tubes. I carry that comment with me when I read, “Just let them die”, “Thinning the herd”, “Population control”, “Let the junkies die”, “Let them die with their choice!!”, “Reviving them is a waste of taxpayer money”,

“Jail or dead. I don’t care”, “Just die”. Read Gloria Anzaldua’s words again. Let’s begin. Civility is an act of knowledge production in which communities come together to understand events and society. To come to an understanding, many different people must share their unique insights and points of view. Those will collide. Those collisions will be painful. Those collisions are necessary to build a community that recognizes individual positionalities while examining structures of power and our place within those structures. Those collisions are taking place in the comment sections of Facebook.

In the location of Facebook, the circularity of power plays a role in the encoding and decoding of comments. Whereas letters to the editor kept the power of voice in the control of the newspaper, comment sections broaden to scope of the conversation. Digital media use of comment threads, such as the one described below in post one, represent the possibility of a more varied encoding and decoding process that constructs a complex circuit that could work to disrupt structures of power often constructed in the more traditional encoding of the news. Incivility threatens this location. This happens when comments’ devaluation of identities and behaviors threatens life chances. This happens when that devaluation refuses to hear the conversation of those labeled as other. Sometimes this happens alongside claims and analysis that are important to consider.

This juxtaposition is jarring, but essential to recognize if we are to believe that these moments of meaning making are important. These moments of complex civility are important because movement to a round table where everyone can sit and face each other is movement toward social action. Facebook, with its speed, interaction, reach, and even its relative anonymity, can provide that metaphorical table in which increasingly more members of the community can take a seat. For that to happen, we need to understand

how civility and incivility interact with meaning making on Facebook. This discussion brings the statistics from the tables above to life to formulate further thinking toward that goal.

### *Post One*

Coding for civility brought in examples of spirals of empowerment. Civility can be seen as commenters feeling empowered to connect through sustained engagement on an issue. During this dialogue commenters gain a deeper understanding of their own claims as they work to best clarify their point of view. At the same time commenters are given the opportunity to consider other viewpoints through the claims, analysis, proposed solutions, and evidence of their peers. As opposed to spirals of silence, spirals of empowerment thread comments together via themes of communication instead of themes of devaluation.

This is done twice in Post One. In the first comment thread, commenter 5 sustains engagement throughout a thread of 36 replies. They begin the thread by referencing research that shows that treatment, as opposed to jail, is most effective for individuals with substance misuse disorders. This opens a door in which several users tell personal stories of their path to sobriety. These stories work as anecdotal evidence as well as emotional appeals. As users enter the *DDN* Facebook page they use their knowledge of the genre to construct their comments. However, the use of comment threads allows users to negotiate the space and what is produced there together.

For example, when commenter 5B asserts that statistics for recovery are low and dismisses recovery stating, “once an addict always an addict!”, the original poster (OP) is quick to respond. Their response doesn’t vilify commenter 5B. Instead they acknowledge



the fear behind 5Bs response by writing, “Yes, between 50 to 90% is a very scary statistic, its always a VERY wide range” (5C). The OP goes on to humanize those with substance abuse disorders, analyzes potential root causes of substance misuse, and makes additional claims which clarify their original position on the ineffectiveness of imprisoning those with substance misuse disorders. The OP analysis of potential root causes of substance misuse also ties directly with practices for democracy that The Kettering Foundation lays out in which democratic practices require naming and framing the issue. By continuing the conversation with commenter 5B the OP is able to continue to expose and explore the roots of the opioid epidemic in Dayton.

This comment thread is an example of a spiral of empowerment, because the OP approaches commenter 5B with additional claims, analysis, and evidence while recognizing his fear. Additionally, commenter 5F responds to the OP analysis, offering a partial solution in which money is allocated for rehab centers instead of prisons. 5F suggests that these centers operate like a prison sentence which individuals are mandated to complete. From their solution, additional commenters who identify themselves as substance abuse counselors give a variety of opinions on mandatory recovery programs. While their opinions differ, they respond to each other with clarification, questions, and additional claims. During this time the OP takes time to respond to each portion of a commenter’s claims, including moments of incivility. Further, they expand the “actional possibilities” (Bazerman) of the genre of Facebook by participating in a sustained engagement that allows users a platform to try out their ideas. However it also encourages them to be part of a conversation of deeper understanding and change.

Many commenters' direct multi-part responses to the OP, providing resources such as STOP (Secure Transitional Offender Program), information on different county policies, and responses to other commenters' claims. At each step, the OP returns with responses like, "I do agree with you on the first part, but...". I assert that the OP's detailed readings of other posts supported a spiral of empowerment. This OP surfaces again at comment 24A after commenter 24 writes,

"Who pays for this rehabilitation because if its tax payers then I prefer you to just die! We pay for illegal criminals, abortions, and now drugs and rehabilitation. On top of that they are probably on welfare too. Just die"

The OP responds by calling out the inhumanness of commenter 24. Unlike commenter 24B who writes, "He is obviously one of those Christian conservatives. See you in hell", the OP breaks down each of the claims laid out by commenter 24 and responds with statistics and analysis. He calls out the incivility in a way that exposes and challenges the roots of the claim.

#### *Post Two*

The in-depth news report posted in Post Two garnered the least amount of comments of all posts analyzed. The image used is of vivitrol, a drug used to prevent relapse. However, this is not explained by *DDN* in the post or article title. The other three articles gave readers the ability to access and bring to the comments their localized knowledge, what they knew about the individuals or locations. This post did not allow for that, because it does not feature (in the post, title of the linked article, or picture) locations or public figures that would be recognizable to readers. It also gives no context to what vivitrol is. This is an important distinction, because if one attempts to click on the

article after they have exhausted their free articles for the month they are prompted to sign into a paid account. This means that not everyone has access to the full text so the ability to work off previous knowledge becomes important at these points.

The comments in this post rely heavily on responses and stigmatization. Much of the stigmatization comes from comments about “dope heads” or “junkies” using vivitrol. However, as one commenter points out, the use of vivitrol indicates sobriety. This commenter did not engage through sustained comment replies and the post did not provide much for commenters to work with. This highlights the importance of accessibility of articles of this type. The other articles’ localization also provides opportunities for commenters to see more about the topic on the evening news or broadcast news channels Facebook pages.

### *Post Three*

The third post focuses on the lifesaving drug, Narcan. Narcan is used to reverse the effects of an overdose. Recipients of Narcan have often completely stopped breathing, sometimes for extended periods of time. Police departments, EMTs, business owners, nonprofit employees, teachers, firefighters, and community members are all being trained to recognize the signs of an overdose and administer Narcan. This post focuses on a local sheriff who refuses to administer Narcan. The content of this post provides the most opportunity for violent language and comments, as commenters expressed support for the decision by commenting that individuals should not be given Narcan and be left to potentially die from an overdose.

This post also provided the largest comment thread with 103 comments. The comment thread begins with commenter 3 referencing the 20 comments in the thread above his. The post before his (2S) states, “😂 best news I’ve heard all year. Let the junkies die”. Commenter 3 writes, “I heard it’s an epidemic. And all you people can say is good? I know I don’t live there anymore but from outside looking in y’all should be ashamed of yourselves for wanting people to die”. From this comment commenters are given opportunities to clarify and form their position on Narcan. Several commenters write that they don’t want people to die but are concerned about Narcan being administered with no support system in place for afterwards. Many commenters seem to not understand the procedure of administering Narcan and these comments provide opportunities for responses that explain the process and provide resources for people to learn more.

39.63% of comments in post 3 are coded for incivility. Take for example post 3I that is written after an exchange about whether the sheriff’s reasoning constitutes a slippery slope argument. The exchange defines this slippery slope as dangerous due to moral judgements being made on personal circumstances of the victim. It is at this point that commenter 3I writes,

“Jesus I’m so tired of all this sympathy for the addicts...wheres the sympathy for the tax payers who are paying the bills. I’m sick of the Boohoo disease excuse, its a choice!! Wake up you God loving people and get a clue!!! Let them die with their choice!!!”

This post is one of the most vitriolic posts in the thread. Unlike in Post One no one directly deals with their statement in order to refute it or more deeply explore it. One

person does call the comment a “voice of reason”. However, within 2 posts people go back to examining the concept of choice with commenters latching onto the wording when describing situations in which a person prescribed pain medicine could overdose and if that is different from someone who illegally takes opioids. This distinction from 3I begins a spiral in which commenters begin a stigmatizing analysis that categorizes the type of people that should be allowed to use opioids and the type of people that should be saved using Narcan.

Several comments later when another commenter reiterates the call for death as punishment the thread seems to have gotten to a place where such direct forms of violent language will not be tolerated. The commenter is called out before the other commenters resume debate over the use of Narcan. This thread stays on topic throughout the comments. When a commenter provides only a portion of statistics on overdoses to fit their narrative other commenters take time to find the study and contextualize it. This form of peer support and monitoring of the comment thread is an important form of civility in which the group comes together to set up conventions of the genre while enforcing those conventions. This enforcement is not done through silencing (such as reporting a post), but through addressing issues of concern and undesirable behavior.

#### *Post Four*

Post Four is highlighted for the tonal shifts and disparity between claims and analysis. One commenter exclaims that, “Nan Whaley has done in the impossible, united the comments section”. This ‘unification’ is marked by intense incivility and lack of focus on the articles issues and claims. The incivility extinguishes civility. Community isn’t built. This post has the lowest response to claims and analysis rate with only a 6% response rate

to the 24% of comments. This tells us that commenters are engaging less with the material and with their peers. Unlike the other posts in which the spiral of empowerment is evident through robust responses, this post marks an obvious spiral of silence. Remarks on Nan Whaley's appearance, intelligence, and gender overshadow the few comments that deal directly with the policy she proposed.

Commenters engage in more politically motivated speech rather than issue-orientated claims. For example, commenter 2D writes, "Same concept as taking guns away from law abiding citizens. Typical 'crat rhetoric". Gun control is not featured in this article or post and wasn't mentioned in previous comments. This comment opened a door for the hurling of insults such as "snowflake", "stupid", "cuntservative", and "sheeple". These phrases were coded as aspersion and their use signals a break down in civility as discussion of ideas and policies is halted and judgement of individuals takes up its place.

Not a single commenter raises a voice in opposition to the disparaging remarks against Nan Whaley. Similarly, not a single commenter comes out in support of the proposal or with an alternative understanding, as could be seen in the previous post. Most unfortunately, this starts a dangerous trend of separating "good people" who need opioids for pain management and "bad people" who abuse opioids. The first comment brings about this stigmatizing approach, and when one commenter tries to complicate the good/bad dichotomy, they are quickly called out for being a "'crat". This tactic of calling out commenter for their political affiliation works to devalue everything they could bring to the table based on the assumption that politics bias their contributions.

## VI. Conclusion

“Just as texts can be an integral part in creating and maintaining the status quo, so too can they help challenge long-held beliefs and practices. Texts can be a source of resistance.”

Patricia Levy (230)

Civility makes possible engaged, sustained conversation. This process of meaning making around the events of the opioid epidemic occurs in both comments of civility and incivility, opening the doors for fluid and flawed understandings. Tracking these comments is an important step in recognizing ways in which comments interact to produce meaning. This understanding can assist in mobilizing and organizing resources to help guide individuals and agencies in more effective online discourse. This content analysis lays out the possibilities of Facebook as a textual site of resistance. While this pilot study only skims the surface of these ideas, it is imperative to recognize the social action that emanates from the comment sections.

By recognizing that sustained engagement throughout a thread is the powerful method of enacting spirals of empowerment, I can now ask more pointed questions about how to best provide insight into organizing that level of engagement. An example of an extension to this work that could provide deeper insight into the utility of sustained engagement would be to analyze if comments on other local events that garner a high number of comments follow the patterns identified here. Or is there something specific to comments on the opioid epidemic that produce these results. Further, out of the 65 posts

collected only 11 had over 100 comments. An analysis of the posts that did not gather over 100 comments could answer questions about how to not only sustain and maintain civility, but also how to develop instances for in depth engagement.

I want to share two more posts that give me hope and illustrate the power of civil discourse. Both posts come during long comment threads in which various forms of civil and uncivil discourse take place. In the first, Commenter 4ZB thanks another commenter. The OP that they thanks has been engaging in sustained discussions on the use of Narcan. The OP has been called “an idiot”, commenters have written “are you really that stupid?” and was even told to “try heroin himself”. They were calling for holistic healthcare measures that would treat the multiple symptoms of addiction.

Throughout the thread they provide continuous dialogue and had multiple moments of disagreement, without incivility, with commenter 4ZB. Upon seeing the vitriol aimed at the OP commenter 4ZB writes, “You seem like a very caring person. FB can be a cruel place to have open discussions. But, thank you for listening with an open mind” (Q3 4ZB). This is the level of civility that produces important social action. These two commenters allow for differences of opinion without resorting to incivility. 4ZB recognizes that the conventions of Facebook often leave little room for civil disagreement and discussion of insights, however they also recognize that the thread sustained by the OP has shifted that spiral.

Finally, I want to close with a comment thread. I want these posts to have moments to speak for themselves. In the thread below two commenters come closer to understanding the fear, pain, and strength of the other. One suggests that the other use their insights to provide information to others who may not understand the complexities



of addiction. Rarely is the social action that Facebook allows for so clearly illustrated. These comments may not be representative of the majority of comments. Yet, they provide insight into core concepts of deliberative democracy and should be highlighted for their potential to more deeply understand the powerful meaning making site that is possible within comment sections.

Commenter 4W has been sharing their story of addiction. Commenter 4V has been concerned with news stories about individuals overdosing while driving.

“Maybe you are right and I truly don’t understand because I have never been in your shoes. I can understand how difficult it may be to stop once you start. I guess it is easy for me to point the finger when I have never dealt with any of this and it makes me judgmental for the wrong reasons. I do worry and I am scared daily because I have a teen who is driving now. I appreciate you telling me your story. I had no idea and I am so sorry you have had to deal with that. Maybe people like me could benefit from people like you talking about your struggles. Either way I am proud of you for where you are now. 😊 (Q3 4V)

*No need to thank. I think your heart is in the right place. For me it was like a daily train wreck my friends, family and loved ones had to live through. So keep feeling protective and such for your children. It’s what mommas do! But please also look at the other side. (Q3 4W)*

Well I wouldn’t have had you not spoken about you stuff so I do thank you for showing me that side.

*Anytime. It’s what friends do!*

In the end civility is about what the community, what Dayton, needs to do to thrive. It is about speaking truthfully and gently recognizing that pain often produces more pain. Our experiences are encoded through language to produce knowledge with which action is taken is taken. Structures of power influence the language we use and the action we take. Dayton is a place where meaning about the national opioid epidemic is being made. It is crucial that we begin to identify what will be produced here. This work has been service to that goal.

## VII. Bibliography

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