Administrative Narratives, Human Rights, and Public Ethics: The Detroit Water-Shutoff Case

Richard K. Ghere
University of Dayton, rghere1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/pol_fac_pub

Part of the Human Rights Law Commons, Political Theory Commons, and the Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

eCommons Citation
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/pol_fac_pub/101

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Political Science at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, msclangen1@udayton.edu.
Administrative Narratives, Human Rights, and Public Ethics: The Detroit Water Shutoff Case

Abstract. This inquiry focuses specifically on administrative (local official) narratives, especially those that speak to contentious issue contexts of social conflict. Specifically, this study draws upon a theoretical connection between hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge to interpret narrative passages of local officials and others related to a contentious public action—the Detroit Water and Sewerage District’s stepped-up water discontinuation efforts (2014 and 2015) that left thousands of inner-city residents with “delinquent” accounts without access to water service. Selected narratives from this case are interpreted on the bases of their literary and social functions. Those interpretations support a subsequent determination of whether and how the power and influence of administrative narrative assume significance as matters of public ethics.

Let’s begin with a pair of inter-related propositions: First, appeals for human rights are more compelling in the abstract than in particular contexts; second, human rights deprivations typically unfold in someone else’s backyard. Regarding the first, rights claimants direct their grievances of deprivation or indignity not merely toward political regimes and governance systems but the cultural mainstream as well. (Hauser 1999, p. 57-81) Thus, it follows that shrill narratives that speak of “dominant (or oppressive) systems,” “injustices,” and “power struggles” seldom find traction within mainstream opinion. Turning to the second, matters of human rights are generally associated with the plights of those inhabiting “the Global South” (i.e. developing societies) as distinct from the (presumably developed) “North.” Although it becomes apparent that these references have little to do with the physical geography straddling the Equator, the specter of “the South within the North” (or abject poverty and rights deprivation in the midst of affluence; Gaventa 2000, p. 256-274) may fall well beneath the collective radar.

Advocacy that advances the rights claims of “the South” within the affluent “North” needs to penetrate the institutional power environment inclined to frame “rights” as taken-for-granted within the rhetorical contours of its legal and political traditions. In the U.S. for example, this institutional “taken-for-grantedness” confines rights discourse within the familiar entitlement
categories of “civil” and “political” concerns while it dismisses the three other arenas of economic, social, and cultural rights affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948. It can be said that dominant institutional discourses generally reframe “human rights talk” in ways that dull its provocative “cutting edge” by either subsuming it within the legal parameters of “civil rights” or rejecting it as legally or constitutionally groundless.

Thus, buzzwords, narratives, and discourses (that is, “ensembles of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena;” Hajar 1993, 45) matter strategically in framing institutional (e.g., governmental and administrative) responses to grievances of rights claimants, and alternatively to civil society organizations that advocate for those petitioners. Rights advocates succeed if and when their narratives raise consciousness in ways that revise the dominant narrative so as to acknowledge the validity of claims (Cornwall 2007, p. 471-472; Vandemoortele 2009, p. 356). This article focuses specifically upon the administrative narratives of elected and appointed officials associated with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department’s stepped-up bill collection efforts and water shutoff policies initiated in 2014. As shown below, several of these official discourses react to the grievances of affected citizens and advocacy efforts of social justice organization in ways that deflate human rights appeals for “affordable water” by reframing them as the pleas of “deadbeats” dodging their water bills.

This inquiry proceeds as follows: First, it presents a thumbnail sketch of the Detroit water discontinuation case. Second, it examines administrators’ and other actors’ arguments as pertinent to each of the three interpretive perspectives—the narrative’s literary function, its social function, and the interaction between both. Lastly, this inquiry probes how the power and influence of administrative narrative assume significance as matters of public ethics.
Specifically, it invokes a rhetorical technique known as “perspective by incongruity” (Burke 1965)—that places an altogether different account of water politics related to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami alongside the Detroit case—to render alternative understandings of plausible motives underpinning official narratives in the latter. In addition, this discussion explores how the narratives in the Detroit water shutoff case relate to the Code of Ethics of the American Society of Public Administration.

THE CASE

Between May and August of 2014, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) shut off water for some 100,000 inner-city residents; that aggressive discontinuation program extended through much of 2015. Although DWSD officials maintained that these water discontinuations reflected routine operating procedure in dealing with delinquent customers, some in the local media associated the stepped-up discontinuation program with the creation of a regional water operation—the Great Lakes Water Authority—as called for in the Detroit municipal bankruptcy proceedings beginning in 2014. Prior to these proceedings Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr of Bellaire, Maryland to oversee the City’s fiscal operation (and generally, governance). One of Orr’s (two) proposals to relieve Detroit’s revenue problems involved privatizing the DWSD, and that proposal came to fruition in the new Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). Thus, the DWSD’s “hard(er) line” in dealing with customers in arrears in their accounts appeared related to an effort to improve its revenue profile to show greater profitability in advance of the privatization deal. The agency defined delinquency as $150 or more 60+ days past due.

Detroit’s economic crises over recent decades have been well-chronicled. Its population declined from two million in 1950 to 750,000 today leaves the remaining inhabitants (half of
them fall under the poverty line) the burden of supporting a major-city infrastructure with a meager tax base. These circumstances lead critics to assail what they see as the perverse pricing of water, beyond affordability for many, in a state bounded on three sides by fresh water lakes. The DWSD did in fact have a financial assistance plan in place, but critics claimed it was underfunded and did little to address the fundamental problem, poor people’s inability to cover the escalating cost of water. Specifically, the Water Residential Assistance Program (WRAP) set aside $4.5 million to help eligible residents “catch up” with their overdue accounts. Supporters of an alternative plan appealed for a reduced rate extended to poor residents, an approach that appeared to violate constitutional equal protection clauses at state and federal levels.

Public debate about the water shutoff issue generally involved DWSD and GLWA officials (backed by Detroit mayor Dave Duggan) defending their policies and others—such as welfare- and civil rights organizations, policy researchers, and United Nations dignitaries—objecting to these agencies’ unwillingness to deal squarely with the water affordability problem. Visiting Detroit in October of 2014 at the invitation of rights-advocacy groups, two UN special rapporteurs framed water unaffordability and DWSD shutoff procedures as matters of human rights deprivation. Water officials dismissed this claim as irresponsible and chided these dignitaries for their unfamiliarity with specifics related to water operations in Detroit.

INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

In exploring how public narratives qualify as ethical concerns, this inquiry engages the discipline of hermeneutics, which “is concerned with interpreting and understanding the products of the human mind which characterise the social and cultural world.” (Burrell and Morgan 1979, p. 235-236) Although typically associated with scriptural interpretation, hermeneutics becomes salient for public administration through “its focus on applying this interpretive process to the
study of human activity and its products (texts).” (Balfour and Mesaros 1994, p. 560; also see Morgan 1980). Specifically, Balfour and Mesaros make the case that “[t]he metaphor of text can be applied to the study and practice of public administration in two ways: to the documents that define an agency or policy and to organizational talk and action.” (p. 560) This section examines narratives expressed both in agency documents and the verbal exchanges of public officials (as well as other stakeholders) related to the Detroit water case issue in reference to (1) the literary functions of, as well as (2) the social functions of narrative, and (3) the interactions of both that season rhetorical expression with a dash of irony.

**Literary Functions of Narrative**

Whether playwrights, composers, administrators, or policy advocates, those who advance narrative accounts undertake artistry that by necessity “crosses a threshold” from a “world of brute experience” (in essence, the totality of an unvarnished reality) to a selected set of perceptions (Camery-Hoggatt 1996, p. 36)—what social philosopher Alfred Shutz calls a “finite province of meaning.” (1971, p. 342). It follows then that narratives usually express a particular point of view from a stance of certainty or assuredness; thus, narrators may exhibit strong ontologies that reveal an immodest “certainty” in their worldviews (Howe 2006, p. 423). Hermeneutics scholar Jerry Camery-Hoggatt emphasizes that it is precisely the removal of the story from brute reality that gives it and its teller interpretive power:

*Stories as such...stand at a critical remove from the unmediated stuff of brute experience, and it is for this reason that they can provide interpretive resources. If stories are finite provinces of meaning, one would enter them by crossing a threshold, they would be structured according to their own laws, and their reality would lapse with attention (1996, p. 37; italics in original).*

How administrators wield interpretive power as they cross the threshold to “finite provinces of meaning” in relation to the identities of others and the significance of events—as
well as how others do so toward administrators and bureaucracies—appear ethically salient. In either case, narrators can wield interpretive power as they manipulate the various literary elements of a story, which Camery-Hoggatt identifies as plot, character development, setting, and mood (1996, p. 42-56). A plot consists of the narrator’s unfolding of selected events—at the exclusion of others—that legitimizes her particular point of view. But as Camery-Hoggatt points out, that outline of events should not lead to quick and obvious conclusions but rather incorporate some suspenseful twists and turns so that the audience can reach intended inferences “on its own;” hence, the narrative’s interpretive power. In this vein, the competent narrator leaves the story incomplete so that the listener or reader can draw (the narrator’s) conclusions (p. 43). Thus, the narrator intends for her audience to come away with a subtext, an intentionally obscured connotation of her actual text (Camery-Hoggatt 1996, p. 1).

Among the narrator’s most potent tricks is that of character development that serves the plot (again, leading to her point of view), apart from any impartial description of a person’s attributes. Clearly, characters cannot speak for themselves; instead, the narrator is free to elaborate upon the cause-and-effect of their motivations, the cognitive processes at work in their minds, the ethicality of their behaviors, and even the “appropriate” basis or standard for judging that ethicality given the story’s context (Camery-Hoggatt, 1996, p. 46-52; Hauerwas 1973, 77-80). In reference to the case study included herein, administrators characterize the motives of Detroit residents who claim they cannot afford to pay delinquent water bills, and conversely social justice advocates characterize the motives and intents of officials in the two water distribution bureaucracies.

Narrators can also shape a third story element, the setting, in how they present the spatial and temporal dimensions of their accounts. For example, narratives in the Detroit water case vary
spatially ranging from the confines of a simple buyer-seller transaction involving a commodity (water), to an urban concern of structural inequality, to an issue of regional coordination, to a state concern for managing the municipal bankruptcy of its largest city, and to an international spectacle of alleged human rights deprivation in a developed nation. Temporally, narrators determine when to begin and conclude their accounts in accordance with their viewpoints expressed through their plots. The fourth story element mood affords narrators control over the dramatic effect of their story as told perhaps in urgency, jest, sarcasm, exasperation, and so on (p. 54-55). Understandably, mood was/is apparent in oral stories, performances, and demonstrations but more difficult to discern in printed texts. To some extent, Internet video (e.g., YouTube) transmissions of narrative arguments—for example, of Detroit Water and Sewerage Department officials reacting to a news event—can convey the mood of narrative expression.

The balance of this section examines the texts and interpreted subtexts of selected narrative passages advanced or supported (respectively) by administrators and other relevant actors (e.g., city residents and advocacy group representatives) as related to the plot, character development, setting, and mood of narratives that convey “finite provinces of meaning” concerning the Detroit water shutoff case that surfaced in 2014.

Administrative Narrations

At least implicitly, Maynard-Moody and Musheno make the case that street-level bureaucrats such as “cops, teachers, and counselors” engage the artistry of storytelling that takes on literary quality by manipulating the story elements discussed above. For example, in “watching a prostitute from a distance,” a police officer reinforces his narrative of unworthiness by pejoratively developing the character of Angela (a pseudonym) that in turn justifies his decision to arrest her (2006, p. 77-79). Is it not reasonable then to expect that higher-level
administrators (whom these authors call “state agents”: p. 9-24) to rely on narratives that “cross the threshold” from brute reality to advance particular “provinces of meaning”? In that this question calls for interpretive inquiry, table 1 below merely illustrates selected passages from narratives related to the Detroit water case that appear to exhibit literary qualities.

Table 1 about here

Although table 1 groups these passages by story element, two complications surface:
First, the majority of the passages appear to enlist more than one element to support the narrative (and are so noted in brackets in far-right column of the table). Second, passages related to a particular story element seem to reflect divergent topical themes—for example, the first passage under plot projects a theme of “agency sensitivity” while the second reflects an “anti-Detroit (or inner-city)” sentiment. Thus, it makes some sense to look at these administrative passages in terms of thematic similarity rather than by story element as shown in table 1.

Of two passages that appear related to an “agency sensitivity” theme, the first is found on the DWSD’s official website:

The DWSD is working closely with its customers in Detroit who are delinquent in their payments to prevent avoidable water shut offs. The department currently has more than 17,000 Detroit customers enrolled into a successful payment plan program that is designed to fit each customer’s financial situation and ability to pay. Next month, the DWSD also plans to launch a new financial assistance program for the city’s indigent population. (DWSD 214)
This statement places the agency at the center of the plot as dealing proactively with the problem at hand, without regard to other simultaneous event or actions occurring “off-stage” elsewhere (Camery-Hoggatt 1996, p. 44-45). The second, shown on a YouTube video produced by alternative media source Vice News, projects an emphatic statement of DWSD Deputy Director Darryl Latimer:
When you say there are thousands and thousands of customers without service because we executed a shutoff, I challenge [sic] to those advocacy groups, bring those thousands of people to us, and we’ll put them in service, we will provide them assistance. SINCE YOU SAID that there are thousands of people, IDENTIFY them and bring them to us. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVVT03LIX0w; upper case added for emphasis)

Presumably, Latimer’s statement intends to counteract the narrative frames put forward by outside social action and human rights groups (discussed below) that portray an agency committed to a regional agenda that deprives inner-city users of affordable water. The deputy director appears to engage the literary element of mood to support his narrative. Nonetheless, it also appears that Latimer’s response to Vice News impugns the character (i.e., veracity) of these outside groups—that they willfully misrepresent the scale of adversity resulting from the shutoff program.

To varying degrees, three other passages relate to the “anti-inner city” theme. The DWSD website links to a Detroit News editorial (2014) that castigates the majority of delinquent customers as “scofflaws”, presumably an apt example of enlisting the power of character development:

Detroit has programs to assist those who need help, but it must crack down on individuals who can pay but don’t…The water department is trying to mitigate any suffering caused by the shutoffs. But it can hardly continue to ignore such a high delinquency rate. The reality is that many customers will pay their bills only is they’re sure they will lose service. (Water shutoff 2014)

Yet an even more scathing characterization of the inner-city came forth from L. Brooks Patterson, the long-time County Executive of affluent Oakland County (contiguous to the north of Wayne County/Detroit), as reported in a 2014 New Yorker Magazine article (Williams 2014):

I made a prediction a long time ago, and it’s come to pass. I said, “What we’re gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn.”
An icon of suburban antagonism toward Detroit’s politics and problems, Patterson energizes a conservative audience as a leader in Republican circles and frequent radio talk-show guest. Although the article, entitled “Drop Dead, Detroit!”, appeared a few weeks prior to the run-up to the water discontinuation program, it reverberated through the DSWD issue nonetheless. In terms of character development, this passage can be aptly characterized as dysphemism, intentionally used to humiliate or degrade people (Allan and Burridge 1991). Further, Patterson’s narrative connects with setting (in casting the water issue as a regional spectacle akin to a morality play in which a chorus of suburbanites chant pay your bill!, pay your bill!; Georgetown Law 2013, 43) and mood as evident in the passions raised.

By comparison to Brooks Patterson’s inflammatory rhetoric, DWSD Director Sue McCormick’s statement on the DWSD website appears to be a rather straight-forward statement of fact:

Our goal is to have as few shut offs as possible. Unpaid Detroit water bills affect only Detroit customers. No suburban customers pay any extra on their bills to make up for unpaid bills on Detroit addresses.

But in a subtle and nuanced way, the story element of setting emerges in assuring customers in the region that they will not be burdened by the inner-city bill delinquency issue; also the element of plot connects with McCormick’s intention to convey that message.

Two of the passages shown in table 1 are expressed by Jim Fausone, a Wayne County Commissioner who also serves on the DWSD Board. Both of these narratives take on an intergovernmental relations theme, as perhaps could be expected from an elected county official:

There’s an absolute lack of national and state planning on water infrastructure except on the backs of individual users. (Asmirhadgi et al. 2014 p. 21)

DWSD probably does a good job of explaining to those who are actively involved—the engineers, mayors. But less so the city councils, and for the citizens it gets fuzzier. (p. 41)
It is revealing that neither of Fausone’s passages demean the character of inner-city water users (he develops the character of the DWSD instead)—who make up a significant segment of his Wayne County constituency. It may be that this intergovernmental discourse offers him a diplomatic way out of a representational conundrum.

Lastly, two passages speak to a fourth topical theme, insider knowledge that others cannot comprehend. DWSD Deputy Director Latimer subtly attributes this knowledge to agency expertise, and in so doing, he characterizes customers as uninformed:

Rate increases are difficult for folks to understand, because from their perspective, nothing has changed. The water is still coming out of the faucet. They can’t see what has changed, EPA regulations, sewer overflows, etc. (Asmirhadgi et al. 2014 p. 26)

Similarly, Alex Wiley—Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan’s assistant—takes the initiative to criticize prestigious international human rights voices for their “irresponsibility” in not adequately understanding the Detroit water situation:

It's disappointing but it's kind of scary that you can have such a heavy name of the United Nations — that is such a responsibility — and to not live up to that responsibility, to come really without an interest in information. No one's saying we're perfect. But if you want to work together, let's work together and make sure policy is built on facts. It's not built on an agenda. (Guillen 2014)

Specifically, Wiley’s barbs were aimed at Catarina de Albuquerque, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, and Leilani Farha, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing. Beyond the literary artistry of dismissive character development in both, the two narratives appear to incorporate a mood of omniscience discernable from their subtexts.

To sum up, it is difficult to generalize about the nine brief narratives discussed above and the contention that each and all incorporate literary attributes, particularly story elements, to
project a public official’s (or agency’s) point of view. A critic could well argue that attention to these short passages isolates them from their broader streams of conversations that would offer fuller contexts for interpretation. Nonetheless, two preliminary assertions surface from this interpretation of literary functions and administrative narratives arising in the Detroit water shutoff case: (1) administrators (like authors, playwrights, and laypersons) rely frequently upon the element of character development to advance their worldviews and (2) “technical” discourses articulated by public agencies (about water distribution, policing procedures, governance measures, and so forth) may reflect artistic mood as much as “the real world.”

Other Narrations

Although the intent of this inquiry is to focus on administrative narratives related to the Detroit water case along with their ethical implications, it is instructive to consider the literary qualities of other narratives that reflect divergent worldviews. Specifically, such dissonant narratives are conveyed by (1) public policy and social action groups seeking to develop the character of delinquent water-users in empathetic terms, (2) international dignitaries that expand the setting of the water issues to an international human rights concern, and (3) policy researchers who recast the plot of the issue in terms of a regional takeover of a city service.

First, advocacy groups and alternative media outlets relate to the particular predicaments that city residents confront in dealing with the escalating cost of water and DWSD discontinuation actions so as to rescue their character from a “deadbeat” stereotype. For example, a joint letter from the ACLU of Michigan and a New York City-based NCACP official to two UN special rapporteurs reported that

DWSD’s use of blue paint to mark the property of “delinquent” homes stigmatizes families and neighborhoods, which is particularly troubling in a city whose poor,
predominantly black residents have all too often been treated as a lost cause by suburbanites, the media, and others around the nation who wish to distance themselves from their plight. (Moss and Hill 2014, p. 10)

The alternative visual media source Vice News (cited above) interviewed Sonia Brown—a resident who endured a water shutoff and a volunteer for the Detroit Water Brigade who allowed that group to use her home as a bottled-water distribution center. When asked about her reaction to the water discontinuation, Brown responded:

They can always tell you to go pay it. But if I got to choose between feeding my kids this week or paying the water bill, I think my babies are going to eat. My babies are going to eat, and I’ll go to a neighbor’s house and get some water or borrow a bucket of water from someone.

Second, UN Special Rapporteurs Catarina de Albuquerque and Leilani Farha wrote the following to Detroit Mayor Dave Duggan:

Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights… We were shocked, impressed by the proportions of the disconnections and by the way that it is affecting the weakest, the poorest and the most vulnerable (Eromosele 2014)

The UN officials added that “When people are genuinely unable to pay the bill, the state is obligated to step up with financial assistance and subsidies. Not doing so amounts to a human rights violation” (Badger 2014)—reinforcing what local advocates had said all along.

Third, research groups that examined the Detroit water situation from a distance follow plot lines that differ from locals who view the situation simply as a matter of water users failing to pay their bills. The public policy organization Dēmos, for example, develops the plot along the intentions of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to privatize (and regionalize) the water facility that would in turn lead to escalating water costs.

The public characterization of the bankruptcy filing and the supporting documentation make it clear that, through the bankruptcy process, the emergency manager has at least two strategic goals in filing and pursuing the petition…[The second of which is to]
organizationally and politically separate the Water and Sewerage Department’s system, which serves more than 3 million people in the city and surrounding areas (roughly 40 percent of the population of Michigan), from the city government, enabling (a) the department’s revenue to be monetized through privatization and/or other means and (b) system employee pension and healthcare benefits to be separated from the city’s programs. (Turbeville 2013, p. 9)

So it becomes apparent that narrators who advance worldviews other than those of administrators are similarly inclined to engage various story elements to make their cases.

Social Functions of Narrative

The early-twentieth century American writer Jack London called Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of wage slavery.” (see Tavernier-Courbin 1994, p. 45) In referring to this pair of literary works that moved class and race boundaries in American society, London spoke to narrative’s potential to affect social relationships, whether to reinforce them or rearrange them toward some agenda of change. It appears that the literary and social functions of narrative intersect at “the prominent place given language in social inquiry.” (Camery-Hoggatt 1996, p. 18) Essentially, this assertion follows a sociology of knowledge framework that locates *language* at the centers of both socialization and collective experience.

For Cammery-Hoggatt the hermeneut, language provides both the medium of socialization and the content that is passed along through that process: “...language is learned in childhood. That it therefore represents both the mode and the content of primary socialization is an insight carried forward by George Herbert Meade...from the beginning of articulated consciousness, experience and language interpenetrate.” (p. 18) For Berger and Luckmann the social constructionists, consciousness comes about through *objectification*, the process of converting expressed ideas to an “objective” reality:

Human expressivity is capable of objectification, that is, it manifests itself in the products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other [people] as
elements of a common world…The reality of everyday life is not only filled with objectifications; it is only possible because of them. I am constantly surrounded by objects that “proclaim” the subjective intentions of my fellowmen, although I may sometimes have difficulty being quite sure just what it is that a particular object is “proclaiming”… (1966, p. 33-34)

It follows then that “articulated consciousness” and/or “objectification” contribute(s) to a “language world” (Camery-Hoggatt 1996, p. 23) that accounts for particular patterns of moral behavior and renditions of social legitimacy.

Typically public narratives reinforce prevailing legitimacy as an “official view of the facts” that contributes to social solidarity and fortifies existing social boundaries (p. 20). In the context of the Detroit water case (and elsewhere), it is reasonable to expect that agency administrators and other public officials will, more often than not, advance “official” narratives that promote boundary stability. But it is the case as well that narrators can change the mood of their stories in response to stimuli such as crises or personal misgivings (p. 50). Camary-Hoggatt explains:

But herein lies a problem. If our experiences of reality were consistently and entirely integrated, and therefore fixed, growth would be unnecessary, and conversion would be impossible…The problem lies in the fact that our experience of reality all too often leads in the opposite direction. In the realm of experience we take to be the most significant, “reality” often proves to be slippery, it forces us into radical shifts in our modes of thought, it bedevils us into conversion. (p. 22-23)

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, social theorists Berger and Luckmann offer a similar idea from the perspective of one’s stock of (socially constructed) knowledge:

Although the social stock of knowledge [represents] the everyday world in an integrated manner, it leaves the totality of that world opaque. Put differently, the reality of everyday life always appears as a zone of lucidity behind which there is a background of darkness. As some zones of reality are illuminated, others are [obscured]. I cannot know everything there is to know about this reality. (1966, p. 42)

If and when a narrator engages the latter, obscured reality, she may well speak in terms of a “linguistic dissonance” (Camary-Hoggatt 1996, p. 31-35) that challenges stock worldviews and
seeks to re-establish social boundaries. This section proceeds to examine selective passages of administrators’ narratives in the Detroit water case in terms of how they structure consciousness (toward either a prevailing worldview or a dissonant dissent) and whether they intend to secure existing social boundaries or change them—followed by a like assessment of other narrations that are pertinent to the case.

Administrative Narrations

Maynard-Moody and Musheno assert that “[t]he state agent narrative is about law abidance, both of citizens and workers, but that [street-level] narratives “are about normative or cultural abidance” (2006, p. 9) While their distinction is provocative in illuminating citizen-agents’ stories of “client” (un)worthiness, the thrust of their work supports the general expectation that administrative narratives (of state- and citizen-agent storytellers) follow a conformance-oriented worldview. Table 2 below arrays the five narrative passages of administrators designated in table 1 as incorporating the story element of setting (related to spatial and temporal dimensions of narratives) in that each of them pertain to social class boundaries (specifically between suburban and Detroit inner-city residents). Table 2 then offers interpretations of (1) how each of these narratives serve to structure consciousness related to the water shutoff case and (2) whether they intend to re-enforce established social boundaries or change them.

Table 2 about here

Table 2 suggests how selected narratives can structure audience consciousness, and in so doing, call for either the reinforcement or alteration of existing social class boundaries. Although the notion of “structuring consciousness” (the heading of table 2’s middle column) stems from
the hermeneutical and social constructionist inquiries referenced earlier, it appears little different than strategic actions to “raise issue awareness” as typically undertaken by public interest groups, trade associations, or even political action committees. Nonetheless, as Camery-Hoggatt points out, narrative efforts to structure consciousness serve to articulate a cultural inheritance: “Insofar as different groups affirm differing moral values or practices, those patterns themselves represent ‘carriers’ of moral heritage…” (1996, p. 28).

Allowing for some latitude in interpretation, the five narrative passages presented in table 2 (left column) can be said to structure consciousness either by a presentation that appeals to a particular sense of history or that establishes a basis for comparison. Specifically, two of these narratives appear to represent historical patterns as a strategy to persuade audiences. For example, when DWSD board member Jim Fausone argues “There’s an absolute lack of national and state planning on water infrastructure…”, he essentially asserts that good planning practices in state and local institutions are perennially overlooked. But in regard to the social functions of narrative, it follows that Fausone’s statement calls for the alteration of boundaries between the DWSD and citizens (as indicated in the right column of table 2). Interestingly, Oakland County Executive Brooks Patterson’s colorful narrative “…What we’re gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation…” appeals to his (primarily suburban) audience by emphasizing historically perceived differences between suburbanites and inner-city Detroiter; presumably this historical account aims to reinforce class boundaries between these groups.

By contrast, the three remaining narrative passages appear to engage comparative strategies of structuring consciousness. Fausone’s statement “DWSD probably does a good job of explaining to those who are actively involved…[b]ut less so the city councils…” sets up an obvious comparison of how the bureaucracy interacts with different constituencies. Again, he at
least indirectly appeals to the agency to extend its social boundaries. Mayoral assistant Alex Wiley presents a different mode of comparison—one that sets an institutional “reality” of the United Nations as “incompetent” (as depicted by his character development of two of its special rapporteurs) against the UN’s institutional ideal. This statement appears to reinforce existing social boundaries by undercutting the credibility of UN officials who advocate on behalf of inner-city water users. Lastly, DWSD Director Sue McCormick’s statement “…Unpaid Detroit water bills affect only Detroit customers. No suburban customers pay any extra on their bills…” differentiates between (or contrasts) what Camery-Hoggat calls “life-worlds” (1996, p. 17) that reflect alternative realities; McCormick was elected the first CEO of the Great Lakes Water Authority in October of 2015. In McCormick’s context, it follows that the DWSD takes care to buffer the suburbanite’s “world” of personal responsibility from the other “world” of delinquent water accounts. Such a narrative serves to reinforce social class boundaries.

In summary, it can be said that narrations serve social functions in the fact that they often reflect the assumptions of a community’s “language-world”, and thus speak resonantly within that community. Such discourses—such as the “official views” often articulated by public officials—that remain consonant with the community’s worldview tend to structure a consciousness of conformity and reinforce existing social boundaries. Conversely, dissonant narratives advance alternative worldviews and in so doing, challenge existing social boundaries. In either case, it appears that narrators structure the consciousness of hearers or readers by appealing to a particular sense of history and/or establishing some basis for comparison.

Other Narrations

Generally, dissonant narratives are crafted to (re-)structure consciousness with the intention of either maintaining or realigning social boundaries (the latter more often the case in
the Detroit water scenario). Several of these narratives employ either explicit or implicit historical chronologies to underpin their consciousness-raising logics. For example, Peter Hammer, Director of the Civil Rights Center at Wayne State University, recognizes the water shutoff problem as simply one additional calamity in Detroit’s decades-long history of decline:

You’ve got to situate water in the context of Detroit. It goes back again to the underlying dynamics of huge water infrastructure, declining population, increasing poverty, the dynamics of Detroit—and it’s not just water…the people who have stayed in Detroit. In some small part, have been those people who have been unable to leave because they lack resources… (see note 4)

In its policy paper *Tapped Out*, the Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute traces the origins of the water problem back further than most realize and comments upon the inadequacy of DWSD’s assistance programs over this time period:

Affordability for individuals is not a factor in DWSD’s rate-setting process, and the city’s recent measures to address affordability after ratepayers have accumulated significant arrearages have been insufficient to resolve Detroit’s water affordability problem. Since Detroit’s affordability crisis began in the early 2000s, two local programs were created to assist individuals unable to pay their water bills [neither proving adequate]…(Asmirhadgi et al. 2013, pp. 24-25).

And the public interest group Dēmos (committed to social equality) attributes the unaffordability of water to recent history—primarily in Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr’s (alleged) misdiagnosis of Detroit’s financial situation:

Detroit’s bankruptcy is, at its core, a cash flow problem caused by its inability to bring in enough revenue to pay its bills. While emergency manager Kevyn Orr has focused on cutting retiree benefits and reducing the city’s long-term liabilities to address the crisis, an analysis of the city’s finances reveals that his efforts are inappropriate and, in important ways, not rooted in fact. Detroit’s bankruptcy was primarily caused by a severe decline in revenue and exacerbated by complicated Wall Street deals that put its ability to pay its expenses at greater risk. (Turbeville 2013, 6)

Nonetheless, other protest voices use a variety of comparative logics to raise consciousness concerning the predicament of unaffordable water. Some narratives offer implicit
comparisons between the plights of Detroit residents confronting the exorbitant price of water in a state bounded on three sides by lakes and that of Coleridge’s mariner (*water, water, everywhere...*; 1834/1946)). Maude Barlow, chairperson of the Council of Canadians puts it this way:

The issue for us is the affordability of water. Even if people can pay these prices, [they are] exorbitant. We live on the Great Lakes here. They’re...twenty percent of the world’s water [sic]; it is appalling that the corporations get it for free, the bottled water companies get it for free...We’re calling on President Obama to call attention to the human rights crisis happening in his country... (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsp_cDoi6U)

Barlow’s comments exemplify Camery-Hoggatt’s point that narrators can *show* as well as *tell* (1996, 60); she spoke these words as her organization staged an ironic (and well-publicized) “humanitarian” event in transporting cartons of bottled water across the border (from Windsor, Ontario) on August 6, 2014.

Maureen Taylor of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization speaks to the water abundance irony but goes further to raise consciousness about the vulnerabilities of families with children in homes without water:

> It is scandalous that, so we live in the Great Lakes, and to have water threatened and to have people told that if their bill if $150 or more, you’re on a chopping block where your water is going to be shut off. In MICHICAN, with Welfare it is PARTICULARLY egregious because with children in the home, it means that Protective Services can come in and take the children out... (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj5dD06Iy9U; upper case added to show emphasis)

Taylor’s organization was instrumental in arranging for the Detroit visits of the UN special rapporteurs in October of 2014.

*Interaction and Irony*

The power of narrative takes on particular meaning in the interaction between its literary and sociological qualities, particularly as it allows the narrator to plant *irony* in the mind of the
reader or hearer. Camery-Hoggatt comments, “If we begin with sociological backgrounds, we can see that the assumptions which inform the community’s language-world will serve as the assumptions that underlie the text, against which the details of the text are rendered specific.” (1996, p. 57) Stated another way, the narrator relies on the “competence” of the reader—that certainly entails her literacy and vocabulary, but more important her grasp of socially-constructed stock “knowledge”—so that he can generate “competence” to augment her stock of “knowledge.” Thus, the relationship between the reader’s and teller’s competencies oscillates in a recursive (two-way) pattern (p. 59).

A simple example may suffice here for clarification: When President Ronald Reagan exclaimed “there they go again,” he depended upon his audience’s stock “knowledge” that they had done it before in order to claim that they’re doing it again now. Note the literary character of this short narrative that incorporates plot and character development as well as its social function in structuring consciousness through an appeal to “known” history. But as becomes clear in the water case, outside voices, such as the UN special rapporteurs who seek to “speak truth to power,” cannot find traction in the hearer’s “competence”. In essence, she would not typically internalize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights nor fathom the possibility that human rights deprivations could actually occur in the U.S. (as perhaps in Myanmar)—as neither has been socialized into her stock knowledge to generate their appeal on behalf of inner-city Detroiter seeking affordable water.

Camery-Hoggatt the hermeneutics scholar suggests that narration is powerful to the extent it elicits a reaction of irony from the hearer (p. 60), like (in response to the Reagan remark) well, what else should you expect of those Democrats! Furthermore, he argues that irony-inducement involves some art of narrative trickery enhanced through particular stylistic
approaches of showing and/or telling. Although Camery-Hoggatt elaborates on several approaches, three directly relate to discourses in the Detroit water case—winks, asides, and prologues. The narrator can wink to the reader or hearer in conveying a variety of subtle messages, but often those winks reinforce the teller’s ideological bonds with the reader or hearer (p. 80-82). For example, when Reagan unleashed his there they go again trope, he was presumably winking to his constituents in a way that legitimized their shared stock of “knowledge.”

So perhaps when Brooks Patterson was quoted in the 2014 New Yorker Magazine article saying, “…What we’re gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation…”, he was winking to his suburban constituents—there those inner-city folks go again—and in so doing, conveying a sense of irony. And possibly DWSD Director Sue McCormick winks at her suburban customers as she makes it clear that “…no suburban customers pay any extra on their bills to make up for unpaid bills…”—in effect, don’t worry, we’ve got you covered.

The narrator can contribute asides, often from off-stage away from “the action.” After his uncle Claudius gratuitously calls him son and nephew, Hamlet addresses the audience to reciprocate his sentiments—A little more than kin, and less than kind. So it is likely that some Detroit residents cried foul when the Detroit News printed an aside, in the form of an editorial (linked to the DWSD website), informing readers that the vast majority of delinquent water-users were “scofflaws” attempting to cheat the system.

Narrators employ prologues to (re)direct the reader’s consciousness by introducing a new or different frame of reference that offers a “more appropriate” basis for understanding a situation. For example, in the executive summary of its 2013 report The Detroit Bankruptcy, the public policy organization Dēmos offers a passage that serves as a prologue for comprehending
the Detroit water situation from the lens of the state-appointed emergency manager’s misdiagnosis of the city’s revenue situation:

**The Shortfall**—*Detroit’s* emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, asserts that the city is bankrupt because it has $18 billion in long-term debt. However, that figure is irrelevant to analysis of Detroit’s insolvency and bankruptcy filing, highly inflated and, in large part, simply inaccurate. In reality, the city needs to address its cash flow shortfall, which the emergency manager pegs at only $198 million, although that number too may be inflated because it is based on extraordinarily aggressive assumptions of the contributions the city needs to make to its pension funds. (Turbeville 2013, p. 1; boldface in original)

The inference here is that the water shutoff issue stems from one person’s unfortunate failure to understand the difference between the logics of (private) corporate and municipal bankruptcies. In another example, academic researchers Laura Reese and Gary Sands put forth an alternative prologue that blames the region’s political elites for Detroit’s inner-city problems for their historical lack of initiative to inculcate a regime of regional cooperation (2013, p. 2). Reese and Sands’ frame of reference largely derives from the study of “regime politics,” as developed by Clarence Stone (1989).

It can be said then that the relationship between the literary and social qualities of narrative is less of a complete integration and more of a continuing oscillation of, or dialectic between, both (Camery-Hoggatt 1996, p. 88). The narrator in text or speech plays upon these patterns; thus, the interpretive researcher needs to work through the narrator’s strategies, skills, and literary tricks to ascertain the nuances that typical content analyses could well miss.

**NARRATIVES, PUBLIC ETHICS, AND FEAR OF LEAKS**

Beyond its characterization of a provocative local/regional governance problem, the Detroit water case spawns myriad public narratives that take on literary qualities and affect social boundaries, only a few of which are discussed herein. The intent of this inquiry is neither to
appropriate blame among narrators in the case study nor to advocate limits on administrative expression (however well-advised). Instead, it is to determine if and/or how the power and influence of administrative narrative assume significance generally as matters of public ethics and specifically as strategies of embracing or sidestepping human rights issues. The “if” question appears indisputable; assuming the validity of Camery-Hoggatt’s arguments (as depicted in figure 1 below), narratives cloak motives, and motives provoke narratives. Moreover, a quick glance at the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA’s) Code of Ethics identifies nearly 20 statements (a few are discussed below) that stand out as germane to various narrative passages presented above. Nonetheless, it is the “how” question that looms problematic—exactly how do administrative narratives, as well as administrative responses to other narrators, crystalize as public integrity issues or as human rights concerns?

Figure 1 about here

One rhetorical technique to expand critical thinking—particularly in reference to our how question above—is to invoke a perspective by incongruity that enables one “to see the commonalities and disparities between…different perspectives.” (Wolin 2001, p. 76 referring to Burke 1965; Morgan 2006) Offering an altogether different account of “water politics” half-a-word-away from Detroit, Jennifer Hyndman documents the “dual disasters” suffered by respective Sri Lankan and Indonesian communities during and after the 2004 tsunami. The first disaster obviously relates to massive loss of life and physical destruction inflicted by the tsunami. Nonetheless, Hyndman—a cultural geographer—places more emphasis on the second, Western one-size-fits-all humanitarian aid that exacerbates on-going political conflict in recipient societies. She argues that “randomized violence” understandably arises subsequent to the tsunami event and related relief efforts. In other words, these circumstances and actions
“overlap” on antecedent conflicts and injustices in a community’s political geography. (2011, p. 48)

So “good governance” aid agencies approach these communities with apprehension, fearing that relief assistance could foment political conflict. Hyndman refers to a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) document in her claim that Western aid agencies temper their relief programs with securitization measures intended to tamp down political disturbances: “Humanitarian assistance has become a de facto political tool through which the threat to world stability and resources represented by poor communities may be diffused by development.” (CIDA 2001). This leads Hyndman to conclude:

The mobilization of fears that the “Third World” might leak into the “First World” has become a common, if not compelling, way to frame development assistance as foreign policy and as a security issue. Insecurity is expressed at different scales and from multiple perspectives: migrants, for example, at once fear the states at whose borders they arrive and yet embody insecurity in the imagination of those same states. Tacit geographies of “us” and “them” have emerged. (2011, p. 49-50)

Thus, this selected incongruent perspective stimulates critical thinking about the relationships with poor communities, good governance, “us” versus “them” fears, and securitization agendas.

From a literary standpoint, it is noteworthy that the respective narrative accounts of anthropologists (and cultural geographers) and of governance advocates represent distinctly different genres. Following the anthropological tradition, Hyndman understands the 2004 tsunami and relief aid as one “chapter” in a tome of historical non-fiction placed well after those devoted to various antecedent events and conflicts that have shaped political geographies; in other words, contextual nuance and how it evolved(s) are paramount. Had she focused on the Detroit water case, Hyndman may well have first surveyed the city’s economic history that surrounded the rise and scale-down of the auto industry with chapters related to (1) “Ford starts
the Ford Motor Company” in 1903, (2) “Detroit’s population hits 1.85 million” in 1950, (3) “the gas crisis [of 1973-4] gives fuel-efficient foreign cars a toehold in the U.S.”, (4) “the city’s credit ratings start to slide into junk territory” in the early 2000’s, (5) “a state review board [appointed by the governor] decides that Detroit is in ‘operational dysfunction’” in 2013, and so forth (see Weber 2013).

By contrast, governance narratives often assume the genre of the (very) short story written in the present tense (reflecting what Hyndman calls presentism; 2011, p. 5), for example (in the context of the case) OK folks, we need to regionalize the water system for the public good, so please pony up. Regarding story elements, governance narratives often advance plots whereby implementing reforms and snapping integrity systems into place transform communities for the better. Moreover, the typically ahistorical quality of the narrative establishes a setting by default; little need to dwell on the injustices of the past (or the social boundaries of the present). In this respect, some literary critics and rhetoricians worry about transformative, transcendent oratory and writing that propose “solutions” to “make things great again,” particularly amid a language world of fear and its tragic propensity to scapegoat innocents (Wolin 2001, p. 176-177; Burke 1955; Duncan 1962, p. 225-245).

It is more than likely that at least a few of the narrative passages quoted above contradict the spirit if not the literal wording of particular ASPA Code of Ethics statements. However, the larger concern here is how narratives, expressed by administrators and other voices, can inform our understanding of public ethics, especially as they surface in current contentious contexts. Thus, it is argued here that concern for the rhetorical artistry and social intentions of narratives inform public ethics in two ways: First, they offer windows on motives at work within contexts
and second (and more provocatively) they challenge the precept of a singular “public good/interest” as a platform for ethics advocacy.

As for the first point, it appears that at least three ASPA Code of Ethics statements appeal for the administrator to resist pressures that compromise marginal voices in society:

4a. Provide services to the public with impartiality and consistency tempered by recognition of differences…(under Strengthening social equity);

4c. Oppose all forms of discrimination and harassment and promote affirmative action, cultural competence, and other efforts to reduce disparities…(under Strengthening social equity); and

6c. Resist political, organizational, and personal pressures to compromise ethical integrity and principles and support others who are subject to these pressures…(under Demonstrate personal integrity).

Each of these statements could be strengthened if efforts were taken to maintain assessments of prevailing narratives within current (national, state, or local) contexts pertinent to particular code statements. In this vein, figure 2 offers a prototype of a contextual assessment that would inform statement 6c “resist political, organizational, and personal pressures…”.

Figure 2 about here

Specifically, the logic here is that ASPA code statements become more salient with associated efforts to characterize some (certainly not all) of the contentious contexts in a particular region or locality. In the prototype shown in figure 2, three critical contexts would be described, followed by brief summaries of the natures of frequent narratives and tropes (i.e., figurative expressions) in the discourses of each context, as well as settings, time frames, and pejorative characterizations of people within each context. In addition, the assessment could advise whether a presumptive suspicion or openness is prudent in confronting particular narratives. Clearly a number of implementation and logistical issues arise with this proposal, but
perhaps they offer opportunities for local involvement on the parts of ASPA chapters or university MPA programs in becoming active advocates of the Code in communities and local media.

Second, it can be said that attention to the artistry and social functions of narrative challenges the conventional idea of a singular “public interest” or “public good” in contentious contexts. It is presumably difficult, for example, to identify a common interest in the Detroit water case. In *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* (1999), rhetorician Gerald Hauser advances a number of arguments that challenge traditional notions of public voice, most notably, that of *one* public square where pluralistic expressions merge in consensus, the “public interest.” Instead, Hauser describes a *reticulate* (that is, a variegated or networked) public sphere of discourses that can be evaluated in terms of (1) the (im)permeability of boundaries that might restrict access to discourse, (2) the extent of active engagement in discourses, (3) the contextualized language of discourses, (4) the believable appearance of narrators in discourse, and (5) tolerance of alternative ideas and traditions (p. 76-90).

Hauser’s ideas of a reticulate public sphere deal not so much with *competing interests* (although they too could surface) as co-existing ways of life (or language worlds as mentioned above) networked interdependently so that problem resolution in one discourse arena may spark acrimony and conflict in another. In other words, fundamental *identities* are in the balance. The administrative issue at hand appears as one not necessarily confined to social equity, but instead as a matter of adapting to an emerging public of agonistic voices and dealing with them in a constructive manner. In *Public Integrity*, Patrick Dobel implicitly addresses concerns of agonism in terms of “building the common amid differences” and the “responsibilities of facing differences” (1999, p. 147-169), suggesting that public officials need “[t]o sustain the common hearth” to find solidarity amid differences (p. 168). Presumably, a reticulate public sphere would
obligate administrators to assume roles as dialecticians capable of upholding respect and
counteracting fear among agonistic voices in contentious contexts.

CONCLUSION

The warrant to “[p]rovide services to the public with impartiality…” in ASPA code
statement 4a (emphasis added) implies that administrators should distance their personal
opinions and misgivings from their work. Nonetheless, this study of administrative narratives—
drawing specifically on discourses from the recent Detroit water case—suggests that the meaning
of “impartiality” may well be contested (as a narrative onto itself) and that administrative work is
enmeshed in narratives that frame people and public problems in numerous ways. Since most
humans fall short of omniscience most of the time, public officials (like the rest of us) cross over
the threshold to their “provinces of meaning” that circumscribe the authority of their public
expression. That expression can take the form of narrative consonance, which reinforces the
existing stock of socially-constructed “knowledge,” or dissonance that challenges conventional
thinking. Conversely, public officials hear the voices of others; thus, they may render
interpretations—again based on their worldviews or provinces of meaning—that either support
or debunk the narrative and/or the credibility of the speaker.

Concern about narratives and rhetoric is seldom pursued as topics in public ethics
research; such an effort calls for interpretive analysis and (in many cases) synthesis rather than
for more conventional (and more widely accepted) positivist methodologies. This inquiry, for
example, is supported by a theoretical connection between the sociology (or social construction)
of knowledge and the hermeneutic examination of text and subtext that intersect at the meaning
of language. Thus, Berger and Luckmann’s ideas about the individual’s “stock of social
knowledge” (1966, p. 39-43) converges with the rhetorician’s “language of lived experience”
(Hauser 2008, p. 445) as an important but problematic construct in evaluating contentious public discourses. Although “rhetoric” is often taken as “insignificant talk,” many concerns of the rhetorician are anything but frivolous; such is particularly the case with public expression that exploits and builds upon fear and that scapegoats people at the margins of a community. Thus, there is a presumably convincing case that interpretive efforts to ascertain the motives and effects of rhetorical narratives can contribute significantly to our understanding of public ethics.

One need only look to Woodrow Wilson’s classic essay “The Study of Administration” (1887) to find the artistry of rhetorical narration at work from the inception of the public administration movement in the U.S. Wilson placed the progressive mood of his text in a narrative of transcendent social change that called for a progressive approach to government. Currently populist-republican narrators impugn Wilson’s progressivism as a perversion of the “original” intent of the constitutional founders. This paper argues that, since narratives connect to motives, they warrant critical scrutiny as matters of public ethics. The thrust of this study is to move toward an ethic of administrative narration, and hopefully this inquiry does proceed in that direction—particularly as it examines a rich array of strategies in literary terms and traces the effects of narration in either maintaining or moving social boundaries. Nonetheless, the destination still appears distant, particularly as to whether such an ethic should focus on the administrator’s self-awareness or rather her charge to scrutinize the emotive narratives of others particularly as they frame “the past” in ways that polarize communities and marginalize vulnerable people. At this point, the latter tack appears more compelling.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Story Elements Supporting Administrative Narratives (selected examples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Narrator</th>
<th>Text/Substance</th>
<th>Subtext/Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>DWSD Website</td>
<td>The DWSD is working closely with its customers in Detroit who are delinquent in their payments to prevent avoidable water shut offs. The department currently has more than 17,000 Detroit customers enrolled into a successful payment plan program that is designed to fit each customer’s financial situation and ability to pay. Next month, the DWSD also plans to launch a new financial assistance program for the city's indigent population.</td>
<td>DWSD is sensitive to the plights of economically indigent rate-payers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detroit News editorial posted on DWSD Website</td>
<td>Detroit has programs to assist those who need help, but it must crack down on individuals who can pay but don’t…The water department is trying to mitigate any suffering caused by the shut-offs. But it can hardly continue to ignore such a high delinquency rate, The reality is that many customers will pay their bills only is they’re sure they will lose service.</td>
<td>Most delinquent rate-payers are cheaters who can afford to pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Darryl Latimer (DWSD official)</td>
<td>Rate increases are difficult for folks to understand, because from their perspective, nothing has changed. The water is still coming out of the faucet. They can’t see what has changed, EPA regulations, sewer overflows, etc.</td>
<td>People don’t understand the complexities of water treatment and distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jim Fausone (DWSD Board; Wayne County Commissioner**)</td>
<td>There’s an absolute lack of national and state planning on water infrastructure except on the backs of individual users.</td>
<td>The poor suffer for actions at other levels off government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brooks Patterson (Oakland County Executive)</td>
<td>I made a prediction a long time ago, and it’s come to pass. I said, “What we’re gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn”</td>
<td>Inner-city residents deserve no empathy—responsible for their plights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alex Wiley (Asst. to Mayor of Detroit)</td>
<td>It’s disappointing but it’s kind of scary that you can have such a heavy name of the United Nations — that is such a responsibility — and to not live up to that responsibility, to come really without an interest in information. No one’s saying we’re perfect. But if you want to work together, let’s work together and make sure policy is built on facts. It’s not built on an agenda</td>
<td>UN outsiders don’t know the facts; but we will inform them if they really want to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sue McCormick (DWSD official)</td>
<td>Our goal is to have as few shut offs as possible. Unpaid Detroit water bills affect only Detroit customers. No suburban customers pay any extra on their bills to make up for unpaid bills on Detroit addresses.</td>
<td>Suburbanites are not picking up the burden of inner-city delinquent rate-payers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jim Fausone</td>
<td>DWSD probably does a good job of explaining to those who are actively involved—the engineers, mayors. But less so the city councils, and for the citizens it gets fuzzier</td>
<td>It is understandable that inner-city residents don’t relate to the DWSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daryl Latimer</td>
<td>When you say there are thousands and thousands of customers without service because we executed a shut-off, I challenge [sic] to those advocacy groups, bring those thousands of people to us, and we’ll put them in service, we will provide them assistance. SINCE YOU SAID that there</td>
<td>Advocacy groups make false claims; DWSD will help anyone having problems paying bill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are thousands of people, IDENTIFY them and bring them to us. (CAPS for emphasis)

*Includes all public officials, agency-published texts, and other expressions posted on agency websites.

**Wayne County includes Detroit.

Table 2: Social Functions of Language in Administrative Narratives (selected examples)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narration (Narrator)</th>
<th>Structuring Consciousness</th>
<th>(Re-)Establishing Social Boundaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There’s an absolute lack of national and state planning on water infrastructure except on the backs of individual users. (Jim Fausone, DWSD Board; Wayne County Commissioner)</td>
<td>Imposing a history that de-legitimizes governmental institutions</td>
<td>Indirectly calls for moving boundaries between public agency and citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DWSD probably does a good job of explaining to those who are actively involved—the engineers, mayors. But less so the city councils, and for the citizens it gets fuzzier (Jim Fausone)</td>
<td>Imposing a comparison institutional responses to different groups</td>
<td>Indirectly calls for moving boundaries in its advocacy for citizen participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made a prediction a long time ago, and it’s come to pass. I said, “What we’re gonna do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn” (Brooks Patterson, Oakland County Executive)</td>
<td>Imposing a history of group differences</td>
<td>Reinforces existing boundaries between suburbanites and inner-city residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s disappointing but it’s kind of scary that you can have such a heavy name of the United Nations — that is such a responsibility — and to not live up to that responsibility, to come really without an interest in information. No one’s saying we’re perfect. But if you want to work together, let’s work together and make sure policy is built on facts. It’s not built on an agenda (Alex Wiley, Asst. to Mayor of Detroit)</td>
<td>Imposing a comparison whereby (asserted) UN institutional “reality” falls short of its symbolic ideal</td>
<td>Reinforces existing boundaries by demeaning UN advocacy for inner-city residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our goal is to have as few shut offs as possible. Unpaid Detroit water bills affect only Detroit customers. No suburban</td>
<td>Differentiating (imposing a comparison/contrast)</td>
<td>Reinforces existing boundaries between</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
customers pay any extra on their bills to make up for unpaid bills on Detroit addresses. (Sue McCormick, DWSD official) between two groups’ “life-worlds” suburbanites and inner-city residents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NARRATIVE</th>
<th>MOTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reader competency</td>
<td>reader competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teller competency</td>
<td>teller competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literary function</td>
<td>social function</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Recursive Relationship between Narrative (Involving Reader and Teller Competencies) and Motive
Figure 2. Proposed Context Assessment Surrounding ASPA Code of Ethics Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context Assessment: ASPA Code of Ethics Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>6c. Resist political, organizational, and personal pressures to compromise ethical integrity and principles and support others who are subject to these pressures.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Critical Context(s)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Water (un)affordability (posted xx/xx/xxxx) <em>(briefly describe)</em>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Refugee settlement (posted xx/xx/xxxx) <em>(briefly describe)</em>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Local policing controversies (posted xx/xx/xxxx) <em>(briefly describe)</em>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequent Narratives or Tropes Conveyed</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting(s) or Social Boundaries in Narratives/Do they vary among narrators?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Frame(s) of Narratives/Do they vary among narrators?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Character Defamation or Scapegoating in Narratives
A. 
B. 
C. 

Prudent Administrative Presumptive Suspicion or Receptivity/Why?
A. 
B. 
C. 