

Interview Paper

My internship this semester is with Democracy onAir. This organization seeks to inform citizens about not just the federal level of legislation, but your state and local offices as well. The thought for this organization came from our founder's outlook during the 2016 election. The spread of misinformation and nowhere to turn to when asking the questions of what's going on in my town, city, or state started the idea to form a connection of hubs in each state to get everyone involved. With higher education as a launching platform for younger, passionate people to get involved, they partnered with George Mason University professors and organizations to act as the first testing group for Virginia. At va.onair.cc you can find out who your elected officials are, what district you are in, what committees are in Virginia's house and senate, what bills have been passed during general sessions, and much more. This site is hoping to add aircasts of politicians. This is where the interns put committee chairs in a position to tell people to work that they and their committee have accomplished during the most recent session. This will become a site to turn to when wanting to be informed and get involved in a democratic society. I chose to interview Shuaib Ahmed and Kerrie Thompson.

Shuaib Ahmed is currently one of the Directors of Democracy onAir. He is from Fairfax, Virginia and grew up in the Northern Virginia area. He attended George Mason University and recently graduated in 2020. His degree is in Information Technology with an interest in cybersecurity. It was during his time at George Mason that his capstone led him to Democracy onAir. Although this was his first time working in the political arena, his interest started long before then. When asked what event first got him interested in politics, he answered the 2008 election. This formative period in middle school involved him watching the political process with

interest. He saw both parties hold primary elections, run campaigns, and saw a president that likes of which the United States had ever seen. Now working with Democracy onAir, he hopes to inform and engage all people. The hope is that Democracy onAir becomes a place for not only information but discussion and forums as well. The difference between this site and others in his mind is the constant updating. Other sites are mainly geared around election cycles, while this one also focuses on the legislative process. Just trying to bring in all sorts of different data into one central place. When asked what he thinks about citizens and their political awareness, he thought education on the subject should start younger and be stressed more. We need to solidify democratic institutions, increase political awareness, and increase the organization of civil society. On the effect that the 2016 election had on him, his response was he saw the increase spread of misinformation and saw the populist movement spread. He said that the United States is the bar for most of the world, and when our democracy sees shift, it has a ripple effect around the world. He also saw the increased use of our digital personas, and how interest groups and adversaries will try to exploit that. What we do on the internet reflects our interest, dislikes, and gives insights to who we are. It is also difficult to pinpoint and a high barrier for finding perpetrators of cyber-attacks. This is where cybersecurity come into play. Since his interest is in the cybersecurity field, he has already started upon that path, currently a government contractor. He said his dream job would be to start his own cybersecurity company and have the title of Chief Information Security Officer. My last line of questioning was how he thought other people could get involved with political organizations, even though they might not have studied it at college. He said that politics is a topic that transcends all of that. If you

have a skill and it can be used to better society, then it can be applicable to any aspect of politics.

Kerrie Thompson is the Outreach Director for Democracy onAir. She is from Washington D.C., but grew up in Norfolk, Virginia. She has just recently graduated from George Mason University with a degree in Global Affairs. She will continue her journey in education at the College of William and Mary pursuing a graduate degree in Public Policy. She was originally set to study biology in college, but her first exposure to politics was a high school history teacher. After this class, she had a growing interest in international organizations and twentieth century history. She continued on this path of self-discovery and found a whole new interest in career. While studying at George Mason, she applied and was accepted into the Global Politics Fellows Program. She wanted to look at the non-profits for a possible internship during the semester. Former Democracy onAir Director, Tim O'Shea, reached out the class in the mission of spreading democratic values through a burgeoning website. She identified with the mission and was eager to do the work. During her time at Democracy onAir she's realized the importance of an informed constituency, and the difficulty to be an informed citizen. With this national organization, she can contribute towards a more informed populous. She was also concerned with the emphasis on national politics in the United States, but a lack of attention towards more state and local governments. She and I believe that local governments have a larger day to day impact on the lives of citizens and more information should be spread and participation should be courted. Lastly, she has greater understanding of the organization and operation of the different levels of government. The respect for the federalist system and how they all work within the other, and the constant communication. I know something that popped up in my

thoughts when talking with her was the occupations of state and local representatives. Most of them still have everyday jobs on top of their elected positions. I think this keeps more tied to society and gives them greater perspective on the impact of their legislation. She is unsure of what the fulfilled Democracy onAir network will look like, and how the partnerships cultivated with local advocacy groups will interact. She sees it as a student or volunteer website that is constantly being updated by states, interviews being conducted for the public, and more involvement of elected officials. She sees the site as a new way to keep the general public engaged and the elected officials continuing to be held accountable. She believes that civil society plays a role and has a responsibility to stay informed, but politicians have an equally large responsibility in being transparent and truthful in their communication to their supporters. She cites that recent events are evidence enough of the importance this plays. Kerrie is still figuring out the future can't say for certain what path she will go down but hopes to pursue a career in environmental conservation and protection.

Democracy onAir has provided many with the ability to build a network and website that the public can use to keep their democracy. The people working here believe that democracy is not something to just leave alone, but to constantly work to improve. Without the hard work, "We the People" will slowly lose our power. I encourage everyone to get involved, get informed, and be the change they want to see. The promise of American democracy is to strive towards a more perfect union, and that job will never be accomplished. Democracy onAir hopes to do all the things above and more.