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Interview Paper

My internship this semester is with Democracy Onair as a content curator intern. In this position, I collect top news and relevant information on Virginia delegates and senators. I also gather information on their committees. I feel as though I have learned so much about Virginia governance as a result of this internship. As the interview paper came closer, I looked forward to learning about the motivations of those who work with the organization and the innerworkings of the nonprofit field.

I first interviewed Shuaib Ahmed. Shuaib currently acts as the Technology director for Democracy Onair and has been in this position since he graduated from George Mason. He told me that his initial exposure to Democracy Onair was in his senior year at George Mason. He worked with the organization as a part of his final capstone project where they had to find a small business to work with for the project. His time with them sparked his interest in working with them in the future and it led to him joining the team after graduating. He also has always had some interest in politics with cybersecurity policies being his main focus because of his educational background in IT. He talked about how one issue that he wished was discussed more is privacy issues in cybersecurity and the pervasiveness of information gathering. Additionally, Shuaib's work with Democracy Onair is his first foray into political work and he feels as though it has helped him become a better informed and politically engaged citizen. I asked Shuaib about 10 questions that I felt would give me an in-depth view of his experience, career background, and political interest. I also wanted to learn more about what he thought were important aspects in the field of politics and international relations. After asking Shuaib about his background and

what invoked his interest into working with Democracy Onair, I moved on to asking him the rest of my questions.

The first question was, “What do you think about the relationship between Democracy and the media?”, this question was based on one of the chapters we discussed in GOVT 434. I thought that since the nonprofit was dedicated to increasing media literacy, it would be interesting to see what its employees thought of the impact of the media in our democracy. In response, Shuaib said, “Media serves to inform people about the work their government leaders are doing but as people are becoming more polarized, it has seemed to expand that sentimentality”. He also spoke on how social media allows people to isolate themselves into echo chambers and avoid the opinions of opposition voices which is important for a democracy to function. My next question was, “What aspect of democracy do you think Democracy Onair fits into?”. I asked this question because I was interested in hearing about what Shuaib thought was the overall purpose of Democracy Onair. He highlighted that the organization serves many roles but the specific aspect that they wanted to work on was providing better awareness and visibility into what is happening in the government process. To me, that signaled that Democracy Onair fits into the accountability aspect of a democracy and wants to strengthen people’s recognition of what their governments do.

My next few questions aligned with each other since they all concerned Democracy Onair and the overall purpose of the organization. I wanted to gain a grasp of what Shuaib thought was the main objectives of the nonprofit and the questions also helped me to understand how the technology component of Democracy Onair operates. We talked about how Democracy Onair was different from other nonprofits with similar objectives because of its holistic perspective on the political process. Shuaib spoke about how the nonprofit cares about creating a

community that people can go to learn about the condition of governance in their state. He also talked about what he wished to see the organization accomplish in the future. He wanted to see Democracy Onair become the go-to source on political information for people about their state and a site that they could reliably rely on. This fit into his position as the technology director as his main objective is to make the site easily accessible and comprehensible for visitors.

Currently, he has been working on creating ways that helps students become better engaged with their representatives and feel more comfortable reaching out to them. I thought it was interesting to listen to Shuaib's thoughts on how his role benefits the organization and what he thought what the future has in store for Democracy Onair.

My second interview was with Todd Gillette, the current Board chair of Democracy Onair, who is also one of organization's founders. He has always been interested in political engagement and was previously involved with a couple of advocacy organizations that focused on improving elections and governance. An example is his involvement with WolfPAC, which was focused on getting states to call for a convention to propose a constitutional amendment that would restore the government's ability to regulate campaign finance and corporate spending on politics, while working on his PHD at GMU. He saw Democracy Onair as a chance to leverage his previous work with the Onair platform and improve political understanding and engagement at the state level. Todd told me about how he's most passionate about how elections are ran and funded especially in light of the most recent elections and voting laws that have been passed. He believes the way in which elections are run show how capable the United States government is capable of dealing with the most pressing issues of our time. The questions I asked Todd were similar to the ones that I asked Shuaib and I found that there was quite a difference between their perspectives on the organization's future and work.

Todd thought the specific aspect of Democracy that Democracy Onair fit into was enabling the democratic process when it comes to citizens. He views the organization as an opportunity to reduce the barrier to understanding elections and governance while also engaging with politicians and other citizens with specific interests. He spoke about how Democracy Onair was different from other nonprofits with similar objectives because of its own process in developing a community where people who want to contribute and network with politicians are able to do so. He wished to see the organization expand to more universities and states in the future. Additionally, he hoped to see the Onair platform reach a point where it is able to redefine online engagement away from an at all costs model to one that is healthy and promotes meaningful content and discussion. Todd also spoke about how his role allows him to focus on defining the vision, goals, and strategy of the organization. In doing so, he hopes to create the foundational basis in which the organization will be able to function and expand in the future. He also talked about how he has been able to use his background in software development and content management systems to develop the onAir platform and customizing it for Democracy onAir to use.

Overall, I found my interviews to insightful, and they deepened my perspective into the work both Todd and Shuaib do for the organization. I also feel like I know more about them as people and their career inspirations. Shuaib and I talked about how hard it can be transitioning from academic life to professional life. He gave me some tips on how to make the transition easy and what I could do now that would help me in the future. Todd and I talked about the ways in which one can stay politically involved and how small acts of civic engagement can go a long way. The interviews have given me awareness into the innerworkings of nonprofit organizations

and the motivations that drive people to work in the nonprofit sector compared to the public or private sector.