

# Prospectus

**The Sum: Power of Difference Assessment System**  
(Technical Topic)

**Users of Facebook as Agents of Technological and Social Change**  
(STS Topic)

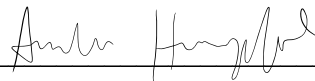
By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## Introduction

In August 2017, hundreds of white supremacists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia for a two-day protest they called “Unite the Right.” This rally was sparked over controversy surrounding the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Emancipation Park (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). As the group made their way to the park, several fights with counter protestors broke out. About 30 minutes before the rally’s original start time of 12pm, the police declared the rally an unlawful assembly due to the sheer amount of conflict that had already broke out (Georgiana, 2018). As people were dispersing, avowed neo-Nazi James Field drove his Dodge deliberately into a crowd of counter protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 other counter protesters (Ingber, 2019).

This tragedy is unfortunately not an isolated event, and it demonstrates the rise of white supremacism in the United States. In the past ten years, there were over 250 extremist related murders in America (Curtiss-Lusher et al., 2015). Although at first glance this may seem like a strictly social problem, it would be incorrect to analyze the rise of white supremacy and extremist groups without taking into account the surrounding technology. Failing to recognize the contributions of the internet and social media will provide inaccurate understandings of how hate groups function in the world today. By evaluating the spread of hate online, I aim to gain a more truthful representation of white supremacy.

In this paper, I will analyze the intersection of technology and society as it pertains to the events that unfolded in Charlottesville during August of 2017. For the technology portion, I will be working with Heyer Voices, a foundation born in memory of Heather Heyer, to create a scalable web-based assessment system that can be used to identify and combat unconscious hate and bias. In the science, technology, and society (STS) portion, I will investigate the role of

social networking platforms, specifically Facebook, in the escalation leading to the conflict in Charlottesville. By looking at the presence of hate online, I will hopefully be able to better inform the assessment system to combat hate in Charlottesville and the world.

## **Technical Problem**

The Sum, led by Elliott Cisneros, is a Charlottesville, Virginia non-profit partnered with the Heather Heyer Foundation which promotes personal growth, skill development, and diversity. The goal of the The Sum is to stand in solidarity with all people, no matter their background (Cisneros & Sherrell, 2016). The Sum offers a Power of Difference Assessment (PDA). The PDA gathers participants' demographics and asks a series of demographic-based questions. After taking the PDA, a report with results is generated and emailed to the participant. The results are categorized across demographics, areas of strength, and areas of growth. The results help reveal people's demographic biases. Those that take the PDA can meet with a consultant from The Sum to learn about their biases and how to communicate better across demographics. There are paid, free, and organizational versions of the PDA with the only difference being the length of the consultation received.

The Sum already has an online PDA system in place. The current system allows users to take the PDA and schedule a consultation. However, the system is error-prone. The system improperly categorizes results and it requires someone at The Sum to manually generate reports and email them to users. As part of report generation, categorizations are manually checked and corrected. This makes report generation time consuming and prone to human error. Although

manually generating a report only takes a few minutes, the time from PDA completion to reports being emailed to users varies based upon availability at The Sum and can take up to 24 hours. This methodology is not scalable and cannot support the upcoming UVA Department of Psychology study of 1,000 PDA takers. In addition to this, the current system does not detect a difference between assessment versions. It is also insecure and allows for URL manipulation.

The goal of this capstone project is to make a new PDA system. The new system should include all the features of the current system. The new system should correctly categorize results, generate reports, email reports to users, and detect which version of the PDA is being taken. For organizational and paid versions of the PDA, the new system should handle organizational access and payments correctly. The new system should also have security checks in place to prevent revisiting previously answered questions and URL manipulation.

In order to make the new system, requirements had to be gathered from The Sum. Requirements determine what features should be part of the new system and which features should be prioritized. Feature prioritization impacts the development timeline. Requirements help track development progress. Separating the work into requirements allows the team to determine who works on which features. Most importantly, requirements establish clarity between the capstone project team and The Sum for what is to be built.

Minimum requirements are to make a system where users can sign up with a valid email address, undergo email verification, select which version of the assessment to take, fill out user demographics, answer each question of the PDA, only view one question at a time, only answer questions in order, and have access to the separate consultant scheduling system. Users cannot change responses to previously answered questions. For the minimum requirements, assessment

versions do not have to differ and The Sum should have administrator access to the system so they can view results, generate reports, and email reports to users.

Desired requirements include having the system correctly categorize results, generate reports, and email the reports to users and The Sum. Desired requirements also include implementing the paid and organizational versions of the PDA, moving the system to the cloud for scalability, and enhancing the systems administrator experience for The Sum.

Optional requirements include integrating the consultant scheduling system with the PDA system, supporting mobile devices, supporting changing the PDA questions, letting The Sum give consultants permissions to view specific user's results within the system, and allows organizations to view the results for their members who have taken the PDA.

## **STS Problem**

Founded in 2004, Facebook's original mission statement was to "connect people through social networks at colleges" (Reagan, 2009). Over the past fifteen years, this goal has grown to incorporate social networks all across the globe. Today, Facebook has over 2 billion people signed up for its services (Facebook Newsroom, 2019). Since they reach so many communities, it is important for Facebook to determine the proper content to display to each user. For the purposes of this paper, I will define "Facebook content" as including any posts, events, pages, or information displayed to the user. Users are presented with not only posts from people and pages they follow, but Facebook also suggests friends, events, and pages. Facebook uses much of the information given by a user, such as friends and likes, to tailor content for the individual.

Facebook has affected technological and social change, giving users a platform to express their own ideas and relationships. In this way, the technology, Facebook, has configured the user, defining what users can and cannot represent by providing specific channels to post and share information. Facebook has undeniably shaped the way people share and connect with others. For many, Facebook has become their primary source of information about their friends, family and the world around them.

However, there have been some societal impacts of Facebook that have not been beneficial. The “Unite the Right” rally, which was organized via a Facebook event, is one such instance (Heath, 2017). In this situation, users were able to build and organize a community of hate and racism. This event was removed one day before the event, but the removal did nothing to prevent the tragedy that struck Charlottesville. This is not the first hate related instance on Facebook, and it will not be the last.

Evaluating Facebook and similar social media platforms only by how they shape and configure users will not provide a holistic view of the society technology relationship; how users interact with and use the technology also needs to be considered. Social media has provided white supremacy groups with tools to effectively and efficiently share information and recruit others (Hale, 2012). By using Facebook in this way, white supremacists and the alt right can hijack the social network system, creating communities of hate online. These users do not necessarily correspond to the typical profile of the user Facebook designers intended as they are not using the platform to create and build communities but instead use the platform to foster hate and exclusivity. I argue that the inability of designers to understand and consider users outside of the standard configuration is what permitted white supremacists to foster a community and organize the large scale “Unite the Right” event. The rise of the Internet has restructured the

white supremacy movement. With all the tools provided by social networks such as Facebook, today's hate leaders are more willing to inspire violence than their predecessors, and the role of extremist groups has shifted from warriors fighting for a shared cause to guerrilla insurgency called "leaderless resistance" (Levin, 2017). By treating users as active participants in the social construction of Facebook, we gain a more complete understanding of the relationship between Facebook and society. This understanding is essential to preventing situations similar to the "Unite the Right" rally of August 2017 in the future.

In this paper, I will use the science, technology, and society framework of "users as agents" to analyze the social implications of Facebook as it pertains to the events that unfolded in Charlottesville. Instead of focusing on designers as the primary participants in the social construction of technology, this framework evaluates the effect users of technology have on the society-technology relationship. I will evaluate how users operated outside the normal configuration to affect both societal and technological change.

## **Conclusion**

The Power of Difference Assessment system outlined in the technical portion of this paper aims to combat hate, beginning locally in the Charlottesville community. This assessment system will classify people based on their power perspective, which means it will attempt to numerically assess how people deal with diversity. This information will be used in consultations and seminars to assist Charlottesville, and eventually the world, with creating a more inclusive and open community.

The STS portion of this paper will provide a more complete and correct understanding of the relationship between Facebook and society. I will analyze how groups of users, such as white supremacists, utilize the technology to achieve a purpose different from those set out by the technology's designers and how this use drives technological and social change.

Together, this paper will provide a view of hate as it pertains to the "Unite the Right" rally which took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. An analysis of the planning and organization behind the "Unite the Right" rally on social media platforms like Facebook will provide new insights about the spread of hate online. The Power of Difference Assessment will be implemented to combat hate and implicit bias found in the Charlottesville community today.

**word count: 1,850**



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