

# **Sociotechnical Synthesis**

**STS 4600**

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**Computer Science**

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# Sociotechnical Synthesis

David Alves (Level I)

Transparency is key for accountability. Perhaps the most influential factor in maintaining an effective democracy is government transparency. In essence, this means that citizens are capable of knowing what goes on behind closed doors within their government. For a society that aims to have its citizenry determine the best path forward, it is of the utmost importance that information is not lost behind the secrecy of bureaucracy. My STS research revolves around highlighting the importance of maintaining an avenue of transparency for democratic governments, while my technical project aims to alleviate this issue in a specific case – the Virginia court system. Currently, the Virginia Online Court Information System (OCIS) offers a website to access publicly available court records from a variety of courts. However, this search is severely limited, particularly for researching purposes. Researchers require this data en masse in order to properly perform studies on it. Moreover, the data must be in an ingestible format for usage in analysis platforms like Excel.

The research conducted for this project pertains to the necessity of transparency within a democratic government. Furthermore, it will outline the current framework for maintaining this transparency. This framework is backed by legislation, particularly the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which guarantees a citizen's "right to know" within the government. Naturally, our right to information established by the FOIA isn't universal. A variety of legislative caveats, such as national security, are often exploited to keep the government in secrecy. While it is established that the citizens have a means of accessing government records, it is often up for interpretation for what falls into the category of "public" records. Moreover, this heightened

secrecy regularly facilitates the exploitation of our most marginalized communities –including within Charlottesville.

As mentioned, my technical portion pertains to the aggregation of court records from the OCIS. To accomplish this, a web scraper was developed with the intention of collecting data from the OCIS and storing it within a database. A web scraper is a program that simply grabs data on a website. In our case, the website (OCIS) contains the data for court records, and the scraper aggregates this data into a MYSQL database. Afterwards, this database is queried for the information requested by the user. This query could be accessing records for a specific court or a specific year. Once the query is performed, all the court records are aggregated and converted to a comma-separated values (csv) file that is compatible with Excel. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to have a frontend website to provide an interface for researchers to query our database.

The motivation for this project stems from necessity. As society progresses deeper into the age of information, the goal of this project is to facilitate the means by which we can peek into the daily dealings of our government. The research conducted revealed an immense importance in this work being done, particularly for marginalized communities. Ultimately, the aim of arming researchers with high-quality court data will improve societal outcomes and increase equality. As the criminal justice system becomes increasingly scrutinized and exposed for exploitations, this project will serve as a means to keep our government honest and accountable.

## **List of Contents**

1. Technical Report: Creating a Consolidated VA Court Case Database
2. Research Paper: The Importance of Transparency in Government
3. Prospectus