

Undergraduate Thesis Prospectus

**Informed Democracy: An Online Tool for Better Communication Between
the People and Politicians**

(technical research project in Computer Science)

Fact-checking Websites: The Struggle over Their Credibility

(sociotechnical research project)

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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Prospectus

General Research Problem

How may a software program help its users evaluate candidates for elective office?

To evaluate candidates for elective office, voters can study their records, their platforms, and their stories online. However, such an effort can be difficult. Voters seeking information may find propaganda instead; the content presented may be selective, inaccurate, or unverifiable. Websites characterizing themselves as sources of impartial information may have political agendas to advance.

According to McHorney (2020), “Approximately 2.8 billion people live in countries with governments that are so oppressive that they don’t even enjoy the most basic political rights.” Yet in the U.S., only “57.1% of the voting age population voted in Barack Obama’s first election” (Bruen, 2020). Through informed voting, voters may “avoid making choices that may not actually represent their political values” (Krasean, 2020).

Informed Democracy: An Online Tool for Better Communication Between the People and Politicians

How can the people and politicians better communicate their ideas to each other?

I am a student in the computer science department. I’ll be working on this project idea in a group with Juan Tapia Claros (jst5ty). Our primary advisor is Rich Nguyen, and secondary advisor is Mark Sherriff.

We plan on creating a tool that would work similarly to the “g0v” project of Taiwan (including [pol.is](#), vTaiwan, and Co-Facts) to serve as a platform to see politicians’ opinions and for the public to vote on various topics. Specifically, our application will display policy ideas that are proposed by various politicians and allow people to vote for or against the said policy, while also providing discussion sections.

The platform will be coded using the web application development framework, Django. The Django framework was initially taught in the CS class, Advanced Software Development. The application will include a complex set of functionalities, including the ability to record and update comments and votes on their respective posts. Consequently, this will require the implementation of a scalable database solution. Furthermore, this design will also warrant the usage of tools taught in Cloud Computing (CS 4740) such as the implementation of Amazon Elastic Beanstalk, a data storage and web hosting platform.

Due to the constraint of time, only the functionalities pertaining to voting and posting policy ideas will be implemented. Future features include fact-checking comments on-the-go through machine learning algorithms and a feature to facilitate the Q&As between community members and politicians.

Fact-checking Websites: The Struggle over Their Credibility

How have critics and proponents of PolitiFact, OpenSecrets, FactCheck.org, and Snopes strived to attack or defend the validity of these sites as sources of impartial guidance for voters?

Third-party fact-checkers have proliferated. Since the election of 2000, trust in established news media has declined. (Swift 2016). Anand (2017) attributes this distrust in part to the business models that govern media. To survive in a competitive environment, the media must value attention over accuracy. Fact-checking services such as PolitiFact, OpenSecrets, FactCheck, and Snopes have promised to offset this effect. Yet fact-checking websites are also subject to actual or perceived bias and as a result may be distrusted too.

According to Ceci and Williams (2020), even accurate fact-checkers may check facts selectively, thereby introducing bias. In fact-checking articles written by just one or two people, the risk of bias is greater. They propose “adversarial fact-checking” by “teams of individuals with diverse sociopolitical views” as a corrective.

Fact-checking websites have received the majority of their criticism from conservative sources. A community on the social media platform Reddit known as “r/conservative” often includes allegations of such biases. For example, Reddit user and member “jazzbuh” (2020) claims “fact checkers are a joke” and that they “were made to silence conservatives.” Candace Owens, an American conservative author and political activist, sued Facebook, claiming that because of its fact-checkers, “opinions are getting censored” (RealCandaceO, 2020). Owens contends that such fact-checking abridges freedom of speech. J.P. Sears (2020), through his popular YouTube channel AwakenWithJP, has made similar allegations in an online comedy sketch, specifically noting that the “safety” modern day fact-checkers may provide, are not worth the unavoidable censorship.

Fact-checking is problematic because facts themselves are problematic. For instance, in September 2020, when claims that Vice President Joe Biden had disparaged U.S. troops as “stupid bastards” surfaced, Snopes judged these claims as “mostly false” (Evon, 2020). Biden had indeed said these words to troops, but Snopes concluded that he had said them “in jest.” Snopes (Evon, 2020) concluded that the significant fact in question was not Biden’s words, which were accurately quoted, but whether Biden had disparaged the troops he was addressing. Such judgments of significance are inevitable opportunities for bias.

Fact-checkers tend to claim that they are unbiased and that they serve the sole purpose of determining the validity of political claims. PolitiFact (2020) claims it is “a nonpartisan fact checking website to sort out the truth in American politics.” FactCheck (n.d.) claims “When selecting material to write about, we seek to devote an equal amount of time reviewing claims by Republicans and Democrats. We do that by reviewing statements they make in the same venues.”

To counteract fake news, some universities recommend fact-checkers to student researchers. For instance, UC Berkeley Library (2020) recommends sites such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and OpenSecrets for confirming the legitimacy of their student's writings. UCF libraries (n.d.) have also produced online resources for finding fact-checkers, suggesting the platforms PolitiFact, Facts First, and FactChecker.

Big tech companies such as Twitter and Facebook sponsor fact-checking. According to Culliford & Paul (2020), social media sites are “under fierce scrutiny over how they police rapidly spreading false information and other types of abusive content since Russia exploited the networks to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.” In

response, twitter recently implemented “fact-checking labels” for tweets (Culliford & Paul, 2020). But Twitter is already caught between some critics who accuse it of permitting too much disinformation to proliferate, and others who accuse it of censorship.

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