**Agora Proposal – Devin McArthur**

Over the last decade, we have seen our social world be completely upended by social media platforms, which have found great profit in human’s propensity towards social interaction, gossip, and discussion. Although their companies have profited greatly from these endeavours and given us powerful tools of communication, we are starting to see that these profits were largely at the expense of our happiness, productivity, and most importantly our political landscape (I say most importantly as our political landscape can have a direct effect on the two latter forces). There are many reasons that these platforms have been set up to be at an expense to our intellectual freedoms. The paramount reason is that these platforms are run by companies, with a board of directors who incentivize these platforms in the interest of profit. This motive leads these companies to hire the greatest engineers of our time, with the sole purpose of ensuring users spend as much time as possible on their platform while clicking on as many ads as they can manage. Because of this underlying motivation, these companies often simply don’t care about fixing the problems in their platforms which are causing these large, mainly detrimental changes to our society. It is through thinking about this problem and its viable solutions that I came up with the idea for Agora.

Historically, an agora was a central public space in ancient Greek city-states; with the literal meaning of “gathering place” or “assembly”. It was the center of the athletic, artistic, spiritual, and political life of the city, and I found it to be the most suitable phrase to describe my proposed solution to the crisis put forth by mainstream media. In short, Agora is a social networking platform which facilitates honest and objective discussion regarding current news topics and events. On top of this discussion, page moderators would create an objective summary of the event or topic that is being discussed, allowing for easy access to the known facts. You can think of these pages as a mix of a Wikipedia article, comment sections seen on Reddit, and account pages like Facebook to judge exactly who you are speaking with. I believe this combination of logos (logical appeal), pathos (emotional appeal), and ethos (ethical appeal) has been missing in online social media platforms and has lead to the misinformation, manipulation, and an overall increase in partisan discussion that has prevailed because of many social media platforms. The main ingredient of this formula that has been missing is ethos, which is the mode of persuasion which revolves around the authors credibility, this lack of ethos has been taken advantage of through online bots spreading misinformation and slander. For this reason, Agora would be the first social networking platform to require users to submit valid photo identification before joining, taking away the possibility for anonymity in posts and discussions. Although this feature will be something that may decrease potential users (mainly in the early adoption stages), I believe that anonymity largely limits the possible scope of discussion that can happen online, as it decreases the chances that an argument will be persuasive, which brings us back to the importance of the ethos. Although the details of many aspects of the site will still need to be worked out (such as exactly how the Summary and Discussion sections will be implemented), I believe that the general system of centralizing discussion of a topic on a single page, and the combination of a Wikipedia style summary of events would have an impact on the way that people get their information regarding current events and miscellaneous topics in general.

Although this combination of the three cornerstones of persuasion is something that has hardly been seen online and is one of the fundamental ideas behind this platform, one of the other large benefits that would be inherit in this platform is the centralization of discussion. Currently, discussions about a topic may be had on niche forums dedicated to the topic where only people involved in that niche topic see it, on Twitter with a specific hashtag where only those with a lot of time and patience can find meaningful discussion, discussion which remains largely opinion based, or on sites like Facebook where you find groups of likeminded people in intellectual echo chambers. I believe that this lack of platform for meaningful and educated discussion is one of the driving forces behind the loss of social cohesion that has become an increasingly problematic over the last decade.

The motivation for this project does not only lay in the problems that come with the echo chambers created in social networks, it also comes from the inherent biases that come with news networks. These biases are extremely difficult for news networks to tackle on their own, as article authors are human, with ideas of there own which are often reflected in their writing. They are also a result of agendas of the news agency which is producing the material, which often lean in a political direction and can lead to an underlying tint of either conservative or liberal bias. This platform counteracts these negative forces by providing all the facts on a topic with all the biases and opinion pieces filtered out, this is where the benefit of Agora really shines through. Currently the general population must do their own time-consuming research to educate themselves on a subject; during this process they must sift through the biases that come with the articles that provide the research which often has the effect of tinting their perspectives back and fourth as they read through both conservative and liberal media sources to attempt to be educated on all the facts. I believe this current process is unfortunately leading to perspectives driven more by ideology and less by facts. This is the beauty of an objective Wikipedia style Topic Page to centralize all necessary facts and none of the fluff.

Since this project is quite large in scale, I think its appropriate to discuss a rough schedule of how I believe the development process should take place. Since this platform would be quite large, I think it’s unrealistic to believe, even with my website development background, that I will be able to personally develop this system in the 12 weeks. Because of this immensity, I think it will be important to quickly test out the validity of specific iterations of this platform by contacting individuals that would likely find benefit in this system and attempt to get feedback; these individuals would include journalists, certain intellectuals, authors, and politicians. Through this feedback I hope to narrow in on the features of the site that would be most beneficial to those individuals and would allow for an agile development process in which I can implement and test key features. As even though I have an idea of how to properly implement the system to avoid biases and promote discussion (something I was unable to fully outline with the length restriction of this proposal), this may not show to be true in practice. This process would allow for quick and efficient development of a minimal viable product (the simplest working form of the platform) and would get me in contact with individuals that may wish to further support the project.

Agora in short, is a project aimed at the betterment of society using the unprecedented access to information that is possible in the 21st century. Through the centralization of facts and discussion regarding a topic into a sole source; the democratic population can educate themselves in one place without worry of manipulation or biases, journalists can watch discussion and see what the public needs to know, and politicians can better understand their constituents regarding controversial topics. This platform has the potential to positively impact two major aspects of our society: the way we consume our information, and the way that we have our online discussions. These are cornerstones of our society, and I feel they both need a push in a positive direction. This venture is an opportunity to design the method that the general population gets their information about the world, and the way that said information is gathered. A venture I believe could greatly benefit our world.