

ImpACT: Restoring the “Act” in Activism

United States of America

University of Virginia

Amayr Babar (Team Leader) - USA - University of Virginia

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Section I: Narrative

Our ImpACT project's main goal was to create a scalable, multiplatform social action platform featuring campaigns powered through the implementation of moral, cognitive, and emotional success patterns. The project aims to revolutionize online campaigns by transforming the inactive role of participants through organizational unity, a “Smart Petition” focused framework, and blockchain functionality. The development of this project was made solely possible by the Davis Project for Peace Grant with no outside fundraising contributed to the project. The initial idea of ImpACT undertook a significant brainstorming and research phase in which we concluded that our target audience, “slacktivists,” have for the past decade been accustomed to the stagnant innovation of platforms, such as Change.org and as a result have settled for a mediocre system of unverified petitions and social media shares where they hope to raise awareness for their cause. This experience has brought our target audience to social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook; however, the intermingling of political agendas or social justice with content oriented towards showcasing one's own personal life creates a false sense of progress in which likes, shares, and comments do not convert to real life impact. It's apparent to us now that there must be a separate platform for those who are marginalized within the digital era to have their voices heard. The ImpACT platform serves to provide a dedicated platform for conversion of the time, effort, and energy of activists that is being wasted on social media platforms, through organizational unity in order to create an organized plan of action, with achievable goals for campaigns. Our proposal was inspired by, and designed around, the consistent failure and neglect activists feel from public office holders and businesses. Ineffective platforms operate on users with a false sense of effectiveness where anyone can become an “interested bystander” for a particular cause; ImpACT strives to allow anyone, regardless of their differences, to achieve real change through their political and social involvement. This summer we conducted our project remotely from our home towns so we chose the Gather Norfolk - Office Space and Coworking site as our workspace. It's an area where local entrepreneurs work away from home in an environment that has an emphasis on productivity and networking. We prioritized location, cost of membership, and available facilities when determining which space to utilize. Working at Gather was an incredibly fun and effective experience. The facility had access to private conference rooms, podcast booths, private offices, and a dining area with special food events on specific days of the week. It was generally very quiet and mostly empty at the office, so it was a really nice place to focus on our project and collaborate in an open area together. When starting to work at Gather, we were fairly confident in our abilities to code the platform as evident with our previous programming background and experience. A major drawback turned out to be clearly defining the processes of how users would interact with the platform to make their smart petition successful. This required a substantial amount of research on our part and an understanding of industry project management techniques to organize those documents. An additional drawback was the regulatory side of the project in terms of financial contributions and policies set forth by the government. We promptly reached out to expert mentors in the field to obtain guidance on how to navigate those obstacles. However, due to the pandemic, these mentors were still very hesitant to meet in person to conduct meetings, thus a majority of external meetings were online over Zoom. The challenges of an online meeting environment were that we were unable to actively engage and form a connection with our audiences. However, an advantage was that we were able to facilitate presentations through screen sharing to successfully explain our project to mentors. For the meetings we had in person, we had to wear masks and socially distance to ensure proper safety protocols.

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Ali and I define peace as the facilitation of diplomacy of all people, thoughts, and ideas, with the absence of violence, in order to provide an environment of freedom, equality, and tranquility. The ImpACT platform serves to promote this definition of peace by enabling anyone who is marginalized within the digital era to have their voice heard through a framework that ensures that they have the ability to create a change in the world around them. Within the short term, it will serve as a conduit between government officials, organizations, and constituents to enable peaceful dialog within community issues. Through redefining the ineffective petition platforms of today, in the long term, the potential of the project is to completely revolutionize the fundamental process through which social action campaigns are scaled, funded, and organized. Currently, the project is still within beta development, but our conducted user surveys and testing metrics indicate widespread support and indication that the development is going in the right direction and the feedback obtained is improving the platform constantly through adhering to an agile software development framework. Once beta development is finished, the platform will be released within the U.S. thus enabling widespread user adoption and implementation of our frameworks. Looking back towards the lessons we've learned this summer, we feel that conducting this project has significantly changed the way we view the world as it has positioned ourselves to see it in the lens of how engineers are builders of societies. The way we design our project and UI/UX experience have the direct potential to change the very way users will go about enacting their social action campaign on the world. It's given us a massive responsibility on our shoulders and has changed us to grow our skillset to fill in that need. We're really grateful that due to the nature of our project, the COVID-19 pandemic did not particularly impact the development of the software platform as we could work on our project remotely from home. However, when meeting with mentors we had to be masked/socially distanced or over zoom, so it impeded connecting with those individuals on a personal level. Additionally, due to COVID-19, we had to create meeting schedules and created a plan of action task list using Trello. It was absolutely essential that we be organized to ensure we were maximizing productivity to make sure development goals were met on time. Ali and I have had an incredible summer experience and hope to impart our wisdom to future grantees by sharing that grantees need to make sure they stay really dedicated to the project throughout the summer. Of course, enjoy your time off from school, but consistently prioritize the obligation you have to ensure your project is completed. Resilience has been the very best tool for us to overcome the challenges imposed by the pandemic. These have been trying times, but if you dedicate yourself to overcoming these challenges by refusing to give up and finding creative solutions to your obstacles, it will insure you're successful in the long term. As a remote project we were able to stay within our local city with minimal travel to accomplish the goal of our project, thus providing a substantially effective work-life balance. Also, conducting a software project allowed us to work flexibly remotely within the comfort of our home at times when going into the office was infeasible. In terms of challenges, sometimes the distraction of life at home hindered our overall productivity causing delays which required extra time to account for. Outstanding time management and project management ensured that our project was able to meet all of our goals. We've thoroughly enjoyed our time working on the ImpACT project and are incredibly grateful to the Davis Project for Peace Initiative for funding through the grant. We're excited to continue to work on ImpACT to further improve the experience for social action campaigns across the globe.

“This project has been the highlight of my summer experience and it symbolizes an unparalleled commitment to working towards providing an effective way to facilitate diplomacy of all people, thoughts, and ideas. Our work acknowledges that there is a problem that needs to be solved and validates that our proposed solution is both viable and effective in solving that problem.” [Amayr Babar]

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“Working on ImpACT has been an incredible learning experience this summer and we really hope that the average user will be able to use the platform to express concerns over the issues they are extremely passionate about and see real results. We’ve learned so much from his project ranging from software development, public policy, and blockchains.”[Ali Sareini]

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Section II: Photographs

