Advanced Web Development - Final Project

Introduction

In this coursework project, I designed and developed a miniature social media network which allows people to signup, login, logout, search for people, view their profiles, add them as friends, post status updates and chat with other users in realtime in a public lobby. This report explains the application and discusses the tools and techniques used and how to get it running.

Tools

The backend is built with Django, a powerful all-in-one web framework written in Python. Django has advanced set of tools for designing backend APIs including routing, models, ORM, database auto migrations and more. It also has built in templating system for frontend functionality. I used Django Rest Framework (DRF) for REST API endpoints.

Chat functionality has been added via Django Channelsthat enables protocols other than HTTP. The chat is based on Websockets and in order for the chat functionality to work, a Redis server must be running on localhost at port 6379. This may be configured at /backend/settings.py.

Even though Django supports frontend views as well through its powerful templating mechanism, I opted for Next.js as the frontend framework because it enables us to develop highly interactive single page applications. Next.js is written in JavaScript therefore it needs Node.js to run.

Next.js is built on top of other powerful JavaScript technologies including React.js and Express.js even though I am not using backend API functionality in Next.js. Instead, the backend is made with Django and DRF as mentioned above. Next.js server side functionality enables it to perform server-side rendering of React.js components and pages which is good for Search Engine Optimization (SEO), file and directory-based routing, code-splitting and built-in support for REST API even though we haven't used this last feature.

React.js works nicely in a Next.js application. React.js is an open-source frontend framework built by Facebook and it provides an ingenious way to mix up frontend layout structures along with the related JavaScript logic into components using a special syntax called JSX. You can think of it like HTML that is written inside JavaScript files. These React.js components help keep the frontend code cleanly organized because all the relevant logic resides directly along with the relevant UI markup. Also, being JavaScript functions, these "components" may be nested inside each other and kept together in their own folders to encapsulate UI logic which makes it easy to reuse the frontend code.

I chose TypeScript instead of normal JavaScript for Next.js because it is strongly typed and allows type annotations which are helpful in minimizing the errors by detecting issues at compile time.

Directory and code structure

The application code is organized as a monorepo i.e. a single Git repository containing both frontend and backend applications.

Module	Directory	
Django	final/backend	
Next.js	final/frontend	

The Django project itself further contains separate sites for:

- A REST API application located at backend/app. This contains API routes /app/api/* handling most of the application logic.
- A chat Websocket application handing realtime communication between users. This is located at backend/chat.
- The Django project as whole is defined and configured at backend/backend

The frontend Next.js application is a Node.js application so its scripts and dependencies are listed at frontend/package.json and application configurations such as how frontend requests to backend API are rerouted to backend are located in Next.js configuration file at /frontend/next.config.js.

How to run the application?

To run the whole application, we need to separately run the Django backend, a Redis server and the Next.js frontend.

Django

In development, we can use the development server built into Django. But first we need to ensure Python 3 is installed and working. To check, please run the following in your terminal:

```
python3 --version
```

It is also recommended to use Python virtual environment to install the Django dependencies. Please follow https://docs.python.org/3/library/venv.html.

Navigate to final/backend and install Django dependencies:

```
pip3 install -r requirements.txt
```

Run the Django development server:

```
python3 manage.py runserver
```

Run a Redis server at port 6379 on localhost. If you have Docker installed, you can run Redis via Docker executing the following command in terminal:

```
docker run -p 6379:6379 redis
```

To run Redis locally without Docker, please follow this guide.

Next.js

Now that we have the backend running, we can turn our attention to the frontend app. Please keep the Django application running and open a new terminal instance and navigate to final/frontend

To be able to run the frontend, we need have Node.js installed. To check, please run

```
node -v
```

If not installed, please install it from here from here.

Restart the terminal, navigate to final/frontend and then run:

```
npm i
```

This will install the Node.js packages needed to run the frontend application. Now we can run the frontend development server:

```
npm run dev
```

Test data

The included Sqlite database has the following users that maybe used to test the app.

Username	Password	Type
admin	admin	superuser
irfan	adminadmin	
hira	adminadmin	
amna	adminadmin	
arif	adminadmin	

The first user admin may be used to login to Django admin via URL: http://localhost:8000/admin to view the contents in the database and make quite modifications.

To create more superusers, please run:

```
python3 manage.py createsuperuser
```

Other users may either be created via Django admin or via the signup page.

Models and data structure

The core backend models and API is defined in backend/app.

Since the Django framework has the <code>User</code> model built in, I decided to use that initially to gain experience with the idea that if it doesn't fullfill my needs, I would use my own model. However it worked pretty well except that it doesn't come with fields such as user's friends, and user's profile picture etc. For that I created <code>Profile</code> model which I linked to the <code>User</code> model via a <code>OneToOneField</code>. This is the Django recommended way. When the user signs up, I collect as much user info as possible and populate both User and the linked <code>Profile</code>.

I have the following fields on Profile:

- user: OneToOneField links Profile to User
- avatar: ImageField to store the details such as location on storage of the user's profile picture
- friends: ManyToManyField relates users' profile to other users's profiles, meaning that they are friends
- birthday: DateField date of birth of the user
- gender: CharField stores the gender of the user e.g. F, M, etc. I use an object that maps the values in the database to user friendly words such as Female, Male, etc.

In order to facilitate the users to add friends on the network, I created a model FriendRequest which allows the users to send someone a friend request and the receiving person is then able to accept if they wish. Upon accepting, the FriendRequest itself is deleted, however the two people are registered as friends with each other. The FriendRequest model has the following fields:

- receiver: ForeignKey links to User receiving the request
- sender: ForeignKey links to user sending the request

Finally, I have Post model which lets the users post status updates. Currently it does not have the ability to attach images to status updates but I plan to do that later. Post is related to User via a foreign key because each user can have multiple posts. Fields on Post model:

- body: TextField main text content of the post
- created_at: DateTimeField to record the timestamp when the post was created
- updated_at: DateTimeField to record the timestamp when the post was last updated, however currently Post editing isn't supported
- user: ForeignKey to link the post to User. Multiple posts may be created by a single user.

REST API and other endpoints

Most of the API endpoints are defined in backend/app/urls.py. Most of the views return data as JSON and are build with Django Rest Framework (DRF). I have extensively utilized classed based views that extend DRF's generics.

Endpoint	HTTP Methods	Description
api/user	POST	Creates user
api/user/login	POST	Creates a new session
api/user/logout	GET	Deletes session of the current user
api/user/current	GET	Returns the current authenticated user along with their profile and friend requests sent or received. This returns detailed info about the user and their profile except the password hash.
api/user/ <int:id></int:id>	GET	Returns the user by the id provided. This returns limited information unless the requested person is friends with the user
api/user/ <int:id>/unfriend</int:id>	PATCH	Removes the user from list of friends of the current user
api/user/ <int:id>/posts</int:id>	POST	Returns a list of posts created by the given user ordered most recent first. Returns permission denied if the user is not self or a freind of the requesting user.
api/user/ <str:search_text></str:search_text>	GET	Returns a list of users and their profiles whose usernames match the given search_text. This returns limited information.
api/request	POST	Creates a new friend request, automatically registering the current user as the sender.
api/request/ <int:id>/accept</int:id>	DELETE	Deletes the friend request and registers sender and the receiver as each other's friends.
api/request/ <int:id>/reject</int:id>	DELETE	Deletes the friend request and does nothing else i.e. doesn't add the two people as each other's friends.
api/post	POST, GET	If method is POST, creates a new post and registers current user as foreign key. If method is GET, returns all the posts created by the requesting user or their friends, ordered most recent first.

Form handling and AJAX

Being a single page application (SPA), the forms and other actions are submitted via AJAX as application/json in most cases, except where complex data such as files are submitted along with other info, in which case I submit the form as multipart/form-data.

In the frontend, the forms are handled using an excellent React.js library called Formik. Since Next.js itself is built on top on React.js, we can use Formik with Next.js as well. Formik simplifies React.js forms because it encapsulates the form state and simplifies JSX syntax of the forms dramatically compared to raw React.js forms by using a React.js feature called Context.

I have a custom FormikInput component at location frontend/components and in there I get the form input's onChange handlers and other details using a React Hook called useField. This component then simply from the React context knows the form it is included in and lets the formik handle its state (i.e. onChange and value props) using name prop.

Formik then calls appropriate methods I passed into useFormik hook e.g. onSubmit and validate based on user actions.

For forms that allow upload of files such the signup form which allows attaching a profile picture, since we have binary data, I transform the JavaScript object from Formik into a FormData object that emulates the traditional HTML forms and allows sending of the binary data.

For doing the API calls (not just form submissions but AJAX calls in general), I have used custom methods fetcher and fetcherSwr located in frontend/utils. The latter is used with SWR a library that implements "stale while revalidate" pattern i.e. we display the cached values to the user while we refetch the fresh data. Please see frontend/pages/index.tsx for an example.

Validation

Validation is performed both in the backend by the database, Django (Models) and the Django Rest Framework (Serializers) and also in the fronedend using Formik.

The frontend validation improves the user experience a lot. On the frontend, I pass in a validation method to useFormik that is then called by Formik on every change in user input. I designed the FormikInput component I discussed above, in such a way that it gets any validation error from Fromik through useField and then displays the error using Bootstrap (Reactstrap) error message component that styles these validation messages nicely.

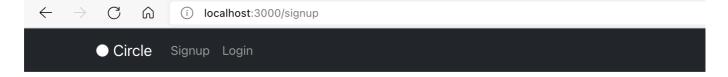
Since the user receives instant feedback about whether the form is valid or invalid, it saves them the hassle of submitting an invalid form only to find out after page reload that the form is invalid. One downside of this approach is that there may be a mismatch between the frontend and backend validation rules. However the benefit far outweighs the disadvantages.

Here is a simple example of login page form handling:

```
// frontend/pages/login.tsx
export default function Login() {
 // ... other code ...
 const formik = useFormik<{</pre>
   username: string;
   password: string;
 }>({
   initialValues: {
     username: "",
     password: "",
   },
   onSubmit: async (values) => {
       // form submission logic
   },
   validate: (values) => {
     const errors: FormikErrors<typeof values> = {};
     if (!values.username) {
       errors.username = "Username is required";
     if (!values.password) {
       errors.password = "Password is required";
     return errors;
   },
 }):
 // ... other code ...
 return (
   <>
     <h1>Login</h1>
     Please enter your credentials to login.
     <FormikProvider value={formik}>
       <Form>
         <FormikInput name="username" label="Username" />
         <FormikInput type="password" name="password" label="Password" />
         <Button type="submit" color="primary" disabled={!formik.isValid</pre>
|| formik.isSubmitting}>
           Login {formik.isSubmitting && <Spinner size="sm" color="light"
/>}
         </Button>
         {formFeedback && (
           {formFeedback.message}
           )}
       </Form>
     </formikProvider>
   </>
 );
}
```

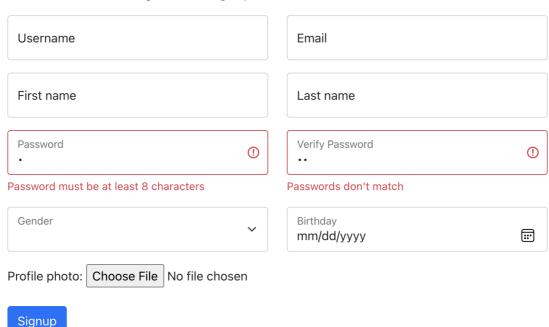
```
// frontend/components/FormikInput.tsx
export function FormikInput(props: Props) {
  const { label, name, type, options, ...otherProps } = props;
  const [{ value, ...field }, meta] = useField(name);
  const invalid = meta.touched && meta.error;
  return (
    <FormGroup floating>
      <Input
        type={type ?? 'text'}
        invalid={!!invalid}
        value={value ?? ''}
        placeholder={label}
        {...field}
        {...otherProps}
      />
      <Label>{label}</Label>
      {invalid && <FormFeedback>{meta.error}</FormFeedback>}
    </FormGroup>
  );
}
```

Here is a screenshot of frontend validation messages on signup form:



Signup

Please enter the following details to sign up for a Circle account.



Authentication

Initially I used JSON Web Token (JWT) authentication based on Simple JWT and it worked pretty well except that I had to set the token in the request header. However, later I found out that Django channels doesn't populate the user in request.scope with token authentication. Instead it only supports Django's built-in session authentication and requires a custom middleware to support token auth. I investigated a few ideas but ultimately I decided to replace JWT with Django session authentication. With SSL / HTTPS, session authentication should be pretty safe. One drawback of using session auth. is that the server has to store all the sessions that have been created, where as in token based authentication the server creates the login token and then token itself can be verified for authenticity because it is encrypted using the private key of the issuer and anyone can read using the public key of the issuer. But no one can fake it because private key of the issue is needed to create one.

While, I could have embedded the user details within the stringified message sent via Websocket, giving frontend that much control is not considered secure and obtaining the user from the request scope is way more safe because then it is difficult for a user to disguise themselves as being another user sending the message.

Frontend navigation, layout and authentication

On the frontend, Next.js handles the routing between pages beautifully. It has this concept of pages that reside at frontend/pages and Next.js scans this directory on app startup and registers routes based on the file and folder paths. It looks for default exported JSX components and treats them as pages. So if we have such a component located at frontend/pages/login.tsx it will be accessible as a page at the URL of login. Next.js also supports dynamic routes which I have used for Profile page.

We have the following routes / pages:

- Home
- Login
- Signup
- Profile
- Friends
- Requests
- Lobby

To ensure a consistent layout, I created a Layout component in frontend/components and wrapped the whole frontend app with that layout in frontend/pages/_app.tsx.

On the frontend, the session cookie is set automatically by the browser. However, I do need to let all the pages in the app know whether the user is authenticated and a valid session exists. To do that, I have relied on React Context to share the user session state throughout the app. This is done in frontend/pages/_app.tsx where I have used a custom hook useSession, this hook provides us the user object and updateSession() and logout() methods which may be called from anywhere in the application e.g. upon login and logout (please see frontend/pages/login.tsx and frontend/components/Navbar.tsx) to let the app update the user object with fresh data from server. This is then instantly made available throughout the frontend app.

For the UI, I used a React.js library Reactstrap for the popular Bootstrap library. The Bootstrap styles are compiled on the fly using Sass. Even though I didn't yet customize the look and feel, we can easily do so by overriding the default bootstrap Sass variables. More details here.

Data access control

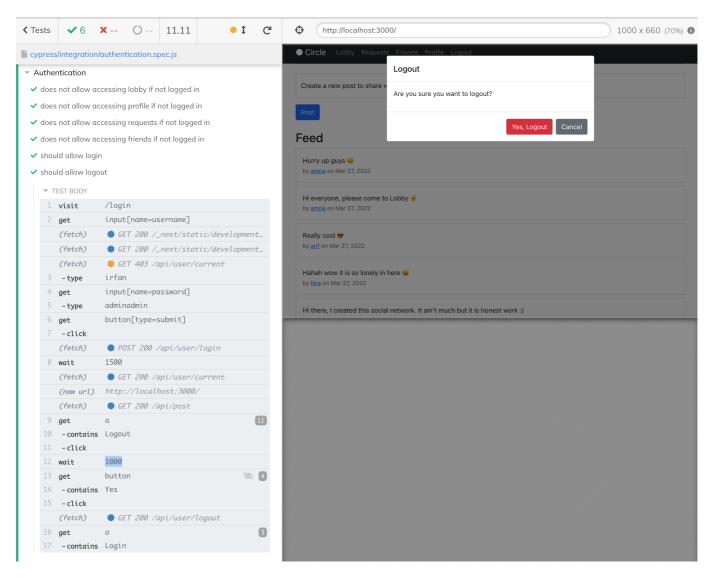
One thing that I had to be really careful about is control over what data is visible and modifiable for a given user. Since this is a social media networking app, data belonging to many many users is stored in the same database tables so any REST endpoints that we create must not only require the users to be logged in and authenticated but also, that they be only allowed to access the information they are meant to access and nothing else. For example, in this simple social network, a user should be able to see their own posts but not those posted by others unless they are friends.

To do that, I used different serializers e.g. UserSerializer for detailed information about the given user and their profile and UserSerializerRestricted for basic information e.g. when someone is not a friend with someone and their profile comes up in search results, we need to limit the information visible to protect the privacy of the user. Currently my serializers are not based on each other i.e. UserSerializer doesn't "extend" or inherit from UserSerializerRestricted. Ideally these serializers should be structured as layers i.e. each layer building on top of the restricted ones. Here is a good example.

Tests

I decided to focus on integration testing because our app has a lot of moving parts i.e. Django, Next.js and Redis. For this, I utilized Cypress. It is a JavaScript library that can be used to automate the user actions e.g. clicks, form inputs, etc. and these tests ensure that the application is behaving as expected and any functionality does not break down upon changes to other features.

The following screenshot, for example, shows how the logout functionality is tested:



And the code for above test looks like:

```
describe("Authentication", () => {
  const login = () => {
    cy.visit("/login");
    cy.get("input[name=username]").type("irfan");
    cy.get("input[name=password]").type("adminadmin");
    cy.get("button[type=submit]").click();
    // wait for login
    cy.wait(1500);
  }
  // ... more tests here...
  it("should allow logout", () => {
    login();
    // click logout link with content "Logout"
    cy.get('a').contains("Logout").click();
    // wait for popup to show
    cy.wait(1000);
    // click yes logout on modal
    cy.get('button').contains('Yes').click();
    // user should see a login link
    cy.get('a').contains("Login");
 });
});
```

These tests are located at final/frontend/cypress and can be run using the following command:

```
npm run cypress
```

For these tests to be passed, all the parts of the app must be running and integrated together, so please ensure both the backend and the frontend app are running in the same environment and also Redis if chat tests are included in the test suite.

Version control

Even though I didn't release any versions yet, I used Git to keep a history of changes to the codebase. Since I was the only one developing the application, I didn't create separate branches and merge requests and instead directly committed changes to the main branch. A log of my changes may be obtained by running git log in terminal.

Possible improvements

There is room for a ton of improvements that could be made to the applications. These include area such as user experience, the architecture, performance, and code quality. Here are some ideas:

- 1. As a social media network, this app will be used by a diverse set of users who may be more comfortable with languages other than English. Therefore translations maybe added to this app using e.g. React i18next.
- 2. The app still doesn't support a number of features that a basic social network is expected to provide. For example, ability to edit profile once signed up, edit posts, add images and other media to posts, retaining a history of messages in the database, ability to restrict the privacy of past posts, finegrained control over what information is shared with others, etc.
- 3. The use of Websockets is limited. The chat functionally currently only supports a single public lobby that is accessible to any authenticated user. For a social network, it is expected that people will be able to direct message others. This is not currently implemented. Also, when a user receives a friend request, they don't received a notification in this regard, and we can use Django channels to build a simple notification system where users are informed about the activity related to their profile in realtime.
- 4. While we have restricted the users to only see their own posts or their friends' posts, however the frontend still makes unnecessary calls to /user/{id}/posts endpoint even if the profile being viewed is not a friend of the user. This could be prevented by adding another check in the useEffect() hook.
- 5. In some cases, I read data from user object that is available as part of SessionContext. These include e.g. the friend requests sent and received. Such data should better be fetched from a separate endpoint because as the models get complex it will be a big database query for all the data to be fetched. Therefore, the session should only be updated when need. Currently, the whole user object is refetched even if we just need to update the list of friends.
- 6. There are quite many TypeScript errors and warnings that need to be fixed by declaring the correct types. Also, we have some console errors and warnings in the browser, which don't affect the functionality but should nevertheless be fixed because if we let the such errors and warnings build up, it will be difficult down the road to trace problems to their root causes and important errors may get difficult to find in a flood or errors and warnings.
- 7. Currently most of endpoints are defined in backend/app/urls.py and while this currently works okay, it is not ideal as the app grows in size and complexity. Similar routes should therefore be moved to separate files and nested inside folders names that follow the routing. The use of drf-nested-routers should be considered.
- 8. The UI and user experience may be improved by displaying useful cues to the user about the application state. Since the app has so far only been tested locally, there didn't arise a huge need for things such as spinners because the server requests end up fulfilled instantly, however when deployed on a real server and accessed remotely over huge distances on the web, the server response will take more time and we need to then display loading state e.g. when a friend request is being made to let the user know that their input is being processed, otherwise the user will continue

clicking the button again and again and end up making multiple calls. Similarly, the form submit buttons should be disabled when a submission is in progress and so on. For logout, I have used the Bootstrap's nice looking modal dialogue, however, in most other places I simply used the basic browser alert which is not very pleasant looking and doesn't allow us to apply any look an feel.

- 9. The images are uploaded to a single directory with the original file names. To prevent name conflicts, these should ideally be assigned unique ids and stored with the unique names. I am not sure though, about whether Django automatically handles such naming conflicts, and it would be nice and I wouldn't be surprised too much if it did so already.
- 10. While I tried to follow secure programming, I feel that there are a lot of loopholes in this code base and should be thoroughly reviewed and patched to ensure it doesn't break easily on undesired user input. All the data and especially that which is going to be saved in the database should be properly sanitized. Even though Django should be doing quite a good job at this due to the models we defined, I still feel that more work is needed in this area. One small example is the password validation: The frontend simply validates it for length of characters whether the "verify password" matches, however the backend has more robust rules. Ideally, the frontend should match the rules in the backend to ensure that form submission doesn't break unexpectedly.
- 11. To make it easy to run all the part of the app, we can write a Docker file to containerize the app and automate the whole process. This will help save time both in development and in production.

Conclusion and self evaluation

Throughout this project, I faced challenges that at times were almost frustrating but finding solutions for those issues helped me learn new concepts and new ways to handle those scenarios. Django and Django Rest Framework (DRF) have proved to be really really powerful tools and an excellent framework for web development. I must say that DRF abstracts away a lot of the data flow and even though this makes it a bit difficult to learn, this also makes it quite powerful in terms of how much we can achieve with so little code.

I am especially fond of how we can use different serializers to control how much information from the same model to show to different groups of users. This is way different from Java Spring framework where we have Jackson views. I am still curious about whether DRF and Django automatically optimize the database queries e.g. when we only take a subset of fields in the Serializer, and I hope to investigate this e.g. using Django toolbar.

Regarding my performance in this project, I believe due to the broad scope of this project and the complexity of the application with all its backend and frontend logic, I got a bit disoriented due to lack of detailed planning. This meant that I couldn't focus on the core features that I needed to do. It would have been a lot better if I did those really really well and polished them. Instead I jumped around between different features and even though the app does quite many things, and the APIs are quite detailed with different layers of permissions, there are a lot of places, where the app has been left unfinished.

Also, the testing has been quite limited so far with no user testing and feedback at all. While I am satisfied with the way I implemented testing with Cypress, I believe I should have also done some level of unit testing to ensure the API endpoints function as expected and unit tests may also be written for the frontend React.js components.

So far, I have only been able to test the app on the development server included with Django. In real world deployment, we will be running it in a production environment server for the best performance and security and therefore it must be tested well in production mode before deployment.

One very import lesson I learned with respect to software development in general is to always throw detailed errors if something can't to processed, never to "eat up" the errors. This is because otherwise the developer using your library will have a hard time figuring out what is wrong. Case in point, I had an issue where the backed would return a 400 Bad Request response without any error in the logs. I even turned on details errors in Django app settings but it turned out the issue was at a layer above Django app itself, actually Django Channels itself was rejecting the request because the form boundary with my request of type multipart/form-data was malformatted. Since, the Bad Request response wasn't accompanied by an error message, I had a hard time resolving this one issue.

Resources

- 1. Django,
- 2. Django Rest Framework
- 3. Django Channels
- 4. Redis
- 5. Next.js
- 6. React.js
- 7. Express.js
- 8. TypeScript
- 9. Python 3
- 10. Python virtual environment
- 11. Redis quickstart
- 12. Node.js
- 13. Formik
- 14. React Context
- 15. React Hooks
- 16. **SWR**
- 17. Simple JWT
- 18. Next.js dynamic routes
- 19. Reactstrap
- 20. Bootstrap
- 21. Sass
- 22. Bootsrap using Sass
- 23. Cypress
- 24. Git