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Technology, Media and Democracy

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Final Report

Echo Cares: Bringing people together through stories

I. What is Echo Cares?

Our team created Echo Cares,¹ a platform for people to read and share positive and inspiring stories. Echo Cares is a social media aggregator that echoes positive sentiments and creates a sense of belonging. COVID-19 has worsened the sense of loneliness among people and there is an increasing need for an innovative way for people to read stories written by people like them and know that they are not alone. Therefore, Echo Cares is also a collection (and later on, an archive) of stories about resilience, humanity and positivity in this global health crisis.

A key challenge was to define what constitutes a “happy” story, and we settled on narratives that are positive in their outlook, creative in thinking, hopeful accounts of struggle and survival, demonstrate societal resilience, and/or showcase acts of kindness to others. Our goal is to activate people around the world to act on issues they care about and learn about how each other are coping. We emphasize stories of powerful individuals that are often left out of the mainstream news cycle. On the website, we also welcome users to submit their own stories besides just reading those of others.

We built the website Echo Cares for both mobile and desktop users who would like an alternative to potentially toxic social media and the overwhelming news cycle. All the stories and content are crowdsourced from public Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. We have a 3-step selection

¹ Watch our introduction video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2lB8rmwQkc&t=7s>

process, and we would have full transparency by publishing the scraping tool and automated sentiment analyzer we use. We welcome public scrutiny and this process is open for improvement as we expand Echo Cares. First, we use a scraping tool to collect social media posts using relevant hashtags and keywords. Then, using an automated process, we run the posts through a Sentiment Analyzer to weed out irrelevant content. The last step is a review process where our team of editors handpick stories and make sure the content is as factual as possible and are from public and verified accounts.

We are implementing two key features on our website. Our filter function lets the user filter by platform, location, timeframe and type of story, so that they can find stories close to them or similar to what they might be going through. Our donation card function lets the user act on the kindness that they see and donate to organizations that matter to them.

II. The Problem

In the current environment of COVID-19, social distancing and shutdowns are absolutely necessary for containing the pandemic. However, many people are also tackling stress and anxiety. Many have lost their sense of belonging, and isolation has aggravated mental health issues. People get news and information on COVID-19 online on social media sites and news media platforms. There is an increased sense of stress and anxiety due to negative news and rampant mis/disinformation. Some of the behaviours in online activity that lead to stress are:

1. **Repeatedly looking for news updates:** There is simply not enough relevant and significant news to be seen or read every hour. But to an audience which wants significant updates so frequently, news sources and opinion writers also resort to polarization, sensationalism and push constant ephemeral news (quick bytes). Constantly

reading sensational headlines and story angles tends to cause negative emotions like despair, outrage and high anxiety. Due to rampant mis/disinformation, readers also have to keep a critical lens active while scouring the news, which creates deep feelings of skepticism and distrust.

2. **A quick glance at headlines turns into 3 hours of scrolling:** It feels important to check the news, so readers carve out time from their schedule to read the news online. But a quick view of the latest headlines turns into 3 hours of scrolling on Twitter or link-hopping on the internet. Now, the reader is not only stressed from the type of information they consumed, they're also feeling direct stress about the work they were supposed to do in those hours.
3. **Passive reading and scrolling without taking any action:** News-reading sessions on the internet can become several hours long. During this time, the reader is consuming a large amount of information. The vast majority consumes news very passively. They are scrolling, reading and clicking away to the next thing. Although content often evokes strong feelings in readers, very few readers comment/engage. Doing this repeatedly can cause feelings of voicelessness and helplessness.

Another root-problem of social media platforms is the toxicity: yelling, negativity and overwhelming content, that positive stories and pure good content gets lost in the crowd. Hence, there arises a need to build a support infrastructure for people to read and share positive and inspiring stories. A website that emphasizes positive sentiments and creates a sense of belonging. A space to *echo* how much we *care* about each other and counter the negative and overwhelming mainstream newscycle.

III. Originality and research process

Google searches for [“good news”](#) spiked in March and April this year and is only continuing to rise, meaning an increased demand for positive narratives across the country. We see this pattern of increased demand whenever there is a crisis, especially when we experience information overload and when our social media feeds fill up with disproportionately negative emotions.

We are not the first to create a social media aggregator, nor the first one to create a positive news website, but we are original in combining both to create a social media aggregator that focuses on positivity and mental health. Some of the positive news websites and newsletters we looked at include: [Upworthy](#), [Good News Network](#), [Washington Post - The Optimist](#), and [GoodGoodGood](#). Some of our inspiration also came from sites that collected personal stories like [Coronavirus Confessions](#) and [Humans of New York](#). After identifying the problem, we grabbed onto the opportunity of creating a curated social media feed where people can read stories directly written by other people, not secondhand by journalists or news organizations. We also researched into how people cope with isolation and depression that’s caused by this kind of public health crisis, and how positive stories can increase hope and reduce fear. In their “Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak”² document, the WHO advised that people should “Minimize watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19 that causes you to feel anxious or distressed” and “Stay connected and maintain your social networks.” We hope to provide this support to people who lack a robust social network.

IV. Viability

² <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>

Due to the overwhelming negative content on social media platforms, people are on the lookout for uplifting, happy stories and news. The absence of such content will drive them to Echo Cares. Echo Cares works as an “almost entirely” automated system. It doesn’t require a large team to find stories from across the globe, as it will be sourcing its content directly from people our users can relate most to - social media users themselves. This content will be scraped from public profiles across the various social media platforms, and users will have an option of submitting their stories to us directly. However, before being published on the site it is passed through a rigorous filter. Using sentiment analysis, only positive content is allowed to be passed through. This reduces the data to 1/4th the original volume. This reduced content is now manageable for our team to manually handpick the right stories from. Along with the uplifting content, our site also provides a set of verified donation links. When reading positive content, users feel the need to give back to society. The uplifting content and the act of giving back will assist in reducing the user’s stress and anxiety during this pandemic. Our users are likely to return to this online “safe space” regularly.

V. Challenges

The main challenge was our content had to be relevant and uplifting. “Uplifting” and “Positive” are subjective qualities of stories and cannot be defined easily by people, let alone by an algorithm. However, filtering the large volume of content we scrape manually is not feasible. To address this problem, we use sentiment analysis to identify positive content from our collection of stories. However algorithms can make mistakes, and Sentiment Analysis only identifies the positivity of the message, and won’t be a filter for relevant, uplifting content. Thus,

this is not used as the only filter for the stories, but is used to reduce the large volume of content to 1/4th the size. This content is then manually filtered through by our team.

Although we scrape content from public profiles, we are aware that people may not be comfortable with their content on a site that is different from the one they posted on. To respect their privacy, once identifying content that is suitable for our site we first reach out to them by commenting on their posts stating that we are interested in publishing their story. If they are not comfortable with their content being shared, we remove it from our collection. Our site functions on the assumption that users visit the site will enjoy its content enough to return. However, we face the challenge of initially attracting users. As our main user base consists of social media-savvy people, we will be running promotions on social media platforms. By publishing users' content, we hope that they will visit the site, and in turn promote it.

VI. Conclusion and reflections

Our design process was heavily focused on understanding the problem we want to solve, and what the users really want in the solution. We decided to focus on the area of mental health due to information overload during a Pandemic. We knew that the large amount of viral, negative content on the Pandemic was having negative effects on users all around us. After debating many ideas that could help with this, we concluded that the best product would be one that curates uplifting, hopeful content for the user. After deciding on this, we spent many sessions iterating on a design for the website that would be as intuitive and uplifting for the user as possible. We hope that this site will form an online safe space for the user where they do not have to worry about accidentally coming across negative content, while simultaneously behaving as a curation of stories on how humans coped with and grew through the pandemic.