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DSC 500

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For my project, I wanted to select a topic that I have a lot of interest in and a little bit of knowledge. My current professional background consists of working in animal science/conservation, so I wanted to find some way to incorporate that. After playing around on Google Trends a bit, my interest was piqued by the search topic of “climate change”. I quickly noticed that over the past three years, there has been a drastic spike, and then, there was a drop off in the search for “climate change” right around the end of April. This was enough to make me want to look even further into potential causes of an increase in public interest in climate change. I came up with a couple of questions/theories, but I believe my number one theory is that public interest in climate change is affected by the media.

The first way I wanted to go about actually researching this topic, and the way that began this whole process, was by using Google Trends. I noticed the term climate change was searched more in April the past three years than at other times. My first thought was that it would increase in April because that is Earth Month, and Earth Day is at the end of April. Therefore, my next idea was to use Google Trends to compare the search terms “climate change” and “Earth Day”. Sure enough, the spike was mirrored for both terms. I am, however, aware that correlation does not equal causation, so this can definitely not be the only research that is done on the topic, but it is a good start (Google, 2024).

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After seeing the potential correlation in Google searches between climate change and Earth Day, I wanted to look where else this interest may have been shown. With over 63% of the world utilizing social media, it is fairly reasonable to assume that the people who are utilizing Google are also utilizing social media. However, we cannot just roll with that assumption. That is why I would like to look specifically at social media posts about climate change over the past three years. I would look at the time these posts were made, their engagement numbers, and the content itself. By comparing the posts involving climate and the time at which they were posted, I should be able to get some idea of when climate change content was trending and, therefore when the pique in the public interest was (Chaffey, 2024).

Another research method I would utilize is conducting surveys. I would first look for any surveys already carried out that may be useful. The first I wanted to look at was conducted recently, performed by the United Nations Development Programme. With 1.9 million calls made and 73,765 completed interviews, the UNDP had an extensive data set. Although there is a lot of fascinating data discovered in this study, it is mostly about people’s attitudes about their government’s actions to climate change. They discovered that about 80% of people globally want more decisive climate action from their government. There is also much information about the specific demographics of their respondents and comparing their views to one another. Another study I wanted to review was the one performed by the Pew Research Center. This survey showed interesting findings. According to the PRC, people are concerned about climate change and are willing to make changes to their lifestyles to help. However, they are less confident that those changes will actually make a difference (UNDP, 2024; Bell, 2021).

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Although both surveys provide great insight into public perception of climate change, they are both lacking social media-specific questions. Due to the missing information from those, I would conduct my own. There are several questions I would ask, and some would mirror the mentioned studies, but I would include a section on social media. I would ask generic social media-focused questions like, “Do you have any social media accounts? If so, what platforms do you use?” Then, I would get into more specific questions such as, “Do you see content on your social media about climate change? Do you believe this information to be accurate? When you see this content, do you share it with others? Does this content make you more or less optimistic toward actions you can take to help reverse climate change?”

When finalizing our research methods, we must also make sure to analyze them for any potential ethical concerns. One of the biggest concerns with a topic like this is bias. With something as polarizing as climate change, we want to make sure that in our surveys, we avoid any biased or potentially leading questions. We also want to make sure to get a diverse variety of respondents to ensure we are getting a wide range of accurate responses. If we are selective of our respondents and do not get a diverse demographic, we risk misrepresenting our data and comprising the entire study. It is important to note that a challenge of relying solely on social media is that although most of the world uses social media, not everyone uses it. Therefore, we are missing out on a large portion of the population. This is not to say we should not utilize social media, but just a side note to hopefully encourage other methods in the future as well.

After comparing the surveys and analyzing the social media content, I noticed that there appears to be an increase in doomism. Doomism is essentially the idea that climate change is too far gone and there is no way to fix this, i.e., we are doomed. Luckily, scientists disagree and say there is still much we can do, and hope is not lost. “To fight the sense of powerlessness, she encourages people to see themselves as part of a collective groundswell of environmental groups working around the world, and to resist going down the rabbit hole of climate horror stories,” says Sarah Jaquette Ray, the chair of environmental studies at California State Polytechnic University. Unfortunately, the doomism trend is something spreading rampantly across social media. The next step is to figure out what may be causing that doomism so that we can address it (Buckley, 2022).

Unfortunately, social media has not been known to be the most reliable news source. Therefore, misinformation is read, shared, and then believed constantly. While an increase in content about climate change is a good thing, the sharing of inaccurate information spread is not. Misinformation can lead to doomism, confuse readers, cause distrust in professionals, encourage inaction, and even potentially put the public in danger. Fortunately, many social media platforms have begun to warn users when inaccurate content is shared. Although these warnings do not catch everything, they are definitely helpful when they do (Turrentine, 2022).

This topic does bring up another potential ethical concern. We also do want to be very careful about participating in doomism ourselves. We have already discussed the negative effects of doomism and how many people already suffer from it. Therefore, we want to ensure that it does not worsen at the hands of our study. We can avoid perpetuating doomism by ensuring accurate information is being spread, choosing our wording wisely in our questions, and the inclusion of negative opinions is nonexistent.

Okay, now what? We have discovered that the general public appears concerned about climate change, but most have little hope that anything can be done. We have also learned that a lot of content about climate change spread on social media is inaccurate. How do we change that? We can hopefully change the public’s perception and promote optimism through the use of social media. We have already learned that most of the world’s population uses social media, so we have a large platform with a large audience.

Social media can be used for good, as it can be used to increase advocacy and generate awareness of climate change. We can start by changing the content that is shared. Before posting, we can consult climate professionals to ensure accurate information is being spread. In the content, we can make sure to include easy steps that anyone can take to make climate action seem more attainable for the average person. Show that it is not something that we solely need to rely on the government for. We can make sure to share success stories when things are going the way we want. It is not all doom and gloom; people every day are making a difference. If we put in effort to highlight those positive stories more than the negative ones, those will be the ones that stick with and hopefully inspire people (University of Minnesota, 2023).

We are no longer in a time where most people are denying the existence of climate change, but now we are in a time where people don’t think they can do anything about it. However, we are fortunate that there are ways to instill hope and optimism and encourage action to counter the adverse effects of climate change. Through the spread of accurate information, attainable conservation actions, and success stories, we can make a difference. What better place to share this than the place where most of the world hangs out on social media? In a day and age where everybody and their mother, and their grandmother, has at least one social media application, it is the easiest way to mass spread helpful information.

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