



Article

Empathy Cultivation through (Pro)Social Media: A Counter to Compassion Fatigue

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Abstract: While a sizable body of literature suggests that repeated exposure to images of suffering may provoke compassion fatigue and news avoidance in audiences, this paper examines whether a different kind of representation can allow viewers to connect with the subjects of media coverage, cultivating empathy for them. The hope is that understanding the emotional impact of the way people are represented in news stories will help journalists better serve the public's need for what Schudson called "social empathy", "stories that—often in a human-interest vein—inform citizens about neighbors and groups they may not know or understand" and create a space where audiences can express positive emotions about their fellow citizens. This paper considers the reactions of followers of the "Humans of New York" (HONY) social media feed to the subjects of the feed's posts, who are not portrayed as tragic victims, but humanized through portrayals of commonplace concerns, such as family, career, and romantic relationships. Comments on more than 8000 HONY posts over a year were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count program. Results indicate that comments on HONY are overwhelmingly positive and socially oriented, suggesting that this type of representation may be effective in countering compassion fatigue and allowing for better social connection.



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1. Introduction

Emotional responses to news content merit attention not only because the information ecosystem is more crowded, more complex, and faster than ever, but because emotional responses may guide behavior—that is, what audiences do with information. Decades of research on exposure to human suffering have suggested that there is a limit to the concern and compassion provoked by such exposure, and that people may ultimately experience "compassion fatigue", in which they feel diminishing interest or concern for the suffering of fellow humans and eventually the urge to turn away from it. Obviously, this diminishing response to mounting evidence of suffering is concerning. If societies hope to effectively address problems that lead to human suffering, their constituent members need to learn about those issues in ways that will cause them to feel concern and to take action to prevent further suffering, to react to help victims and put an end to tragedy or injustice when possible.

Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon largely studied in health care professionals, whose repeated exposure to suffering can lead to a secondary traumatic stress response that results in diminished feelings of compassion over time. Media scholars have applied this idea to the effect of negative news coverage, and particularly negative images, on people's ability to experience compassion. Sontag (1977) asserted that "'concerned' photography had done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it". Moeller (2002) likewise suggested that constant exposure to disturbing, violent images leads people to lose their ability to feel compassion for others. Sontag (2003) later wrote, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated"

(p. 101). This paper asserts that empathy is a more useful emotion for creating a sense of connection between the subject and the audience. Empathy has the potential to put the viewer and subject on even ground, creating a connection not based on feeling sorry for, but on identifying with the other.

Journalists are at the center of this issue for two reasons: they often play a role in presenting images of suffering or tragedy to the general public, whether geographically distant or nearby but outside the viewer's direct experience, and their work is considered fundamental to a functioning democracy. Understanding the emotional impact of the way people are represented in news stories will help journalists better serve the public's need for what [Schudson \(2013\)](#) called "social empathy", and the need for information that will lead to productive action. Empathy is essential to a functioning democracy, as it helps us understand others' emotional states and situations and how they affect us, which leads to legitimate, justified democratic decision making, and ultimately a healthy democracy. We don't need to agree with everything our fellow citizens think, but it is helpful if we can identify with them and understand the basis of their position and see them as human beings with shared experiences, desires, and aspirations with which we can relate. Therefore, this study is interested in whether a particular representation through images and accompanying captions that allow the viewer to connect with the subject can cultivate empathy and prosocial, positive emotional responses.

The "Humans of New York" (HONY) social media feed/photojournalism project offers a useful object of study because its creator, who initially sought to portray ordinary residents of New York City, has taken his camera around the world to share images and short captions of personal testimonials of people in places that are more frequently portrayed in news about conflict and suffering. HONY is notable because the snippets of conversation the feed's creator selects often emphasize frames or topics that make his subjects seem similar to his presumed audience ([Perreault and Paul 2018](#)). While the people portrayed in the feed sometimes discuss difficult or painful situations, they are often framed in terms of overcoming difficulty, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of the situation. Previous research about the HONY feed has suggested that the creator changed his approach over the first few years of the project, evolving to use captions that feature the subject speaking directly to the audience, an approach in line with the public service value of journalism ([Roberts 2019](#)). An analysis by [Wheeler and Quinn \(2017\)](#) found evidence for empathy in a sample of comments on HONY posts, suggesting that members of the HONY audience expressed empathy for the people featured in the feed.

This study analyzes a selection of comments by social media users in response to HONY posts (always an image with a caption featuring a quotation from the subject pictured in the image) over the course of one year and attempts to identify emotional tone and content. This study seeks to expand on the preliminary findings of [Wheeler and Quinn \(2017\)](#), to consider a broader sample of comments and to apply a more widely applied tool for linguistic analysis to more comprehensively assess the reactions to HONY posts. Understanding the emotional responses of the audience can help journalists to more effectively represent the constituent members of society, which may foster empathy for those citizens and thus contribute to a healthier and more functional democracy.

2. Results

This analysis is based on a linguistic analysis of 8172 comments on randomly selected HONY posts made between May 2020 and April 2021. Before removing non-verbal symbols, a few basic counts were done: 2100 comments tagged friends/other people to call their attention to the post or respond to them. There were 4133 heart emojis, 1766 "sobbing" emojis, and 404 crying emojis. The proportion of comments that tagged another user to draw their attention to the post indicates that HONY followers tend to tag friends to share the post with them, as is common practice on many public accounts, although more than one-quarter of the posts doing so indicates a high level of sharing as opposed to strictly commenting.

The remaining analysis is from the LIWC software. LIWC analyzes text across 68 pre-set dimensions and offers some simple percentages in terms of counting word types (verbs, adverbs, pronouns, etc.), and categories related to psychological constructs and personal concern categories, as well as emotion, and calculates several more complicated dimensions composed of several variables, such as overall emotional tone, authenticity, analytical thinking, and clout. The variables are calculated on a scale from 0 to 100.

Emotional tone combines the positive and negative tone dimensions into a single summary variable. According to the software's developers, a score of 100 in emotional tone means the tone is maximally upbeat and positive; numbers below 50 indicate a more negative tone or a neutral balance (Cohn et al. 2004). For the comments analyzed here, the tone variable was calculated as 98.56, which is overwhelmingly positive.

The authenticity dimension attempts to measure the extent to which people reveal themselves in an authentic or honest way, or share content that is more personal, humble, and vulnerable. The calculated score of 6.47 is quite low, perhaps as a result of little focus on the self and personal vulnerability. The analytical thinking dimension captures the degree to which people use words that suggest formal, logical, and hierarchical thinking patterns, as opposed to narrative and personal experiences. The analytical thinking dimension for the HONY comments was 49.53, in the mid-range, suggesting a balance between formal, logical thinking and narrative, personal experiences.

The dimension to estimate "Clout" refers to the "relative social status, confidence, or leadership that people display through their writing or talking" (Pennebaker et al. 2001). The algorithm to calculate Clout was developed based on the results of a series of studies of people interacting (Kacewicz et al. 2014). Clout in the HONY comments (85.42) is relatively high, indicating confidence, but Power (2.09) is extremely low, suggesting a lack of a need to assert social status or power. Clout is different from Power, since that variable reflects people's "attention to or awareness of relative status in a social setting" (Pennebaker et al. 2001). In terms of other dimensions, the Cognitive dimension (7.87) is lower than the Social dimension (13.67), suggesting more social responses than rational. The use of pronouns (10.07) shows a balance between "I" (4.04) and "you" (3.11).

3. Discussion

3.1. Compassion Fatigue

The idea that people have a limited capacity to comprehend or feel concern for suffering has origins in literature prior to the statement attributed to Stalin in 1947 that, "one death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic". Psychological research has long suggested that humans are most likely to act when a threat is immediate and has some personal relevance (Slovic 1982). Weber (2015) suggested that humans tend to respond to immediate threats, which may be related to human brains being wired to respond to change. As mentioned above, the concept of compassion fatigue was first applied to health care professionals who witnessed a great deal of suffering while administering to patients. Many studies of compassion fatigue have found results like these: "We found evidence that as the number of victims goes up, so does the motivation to squelch our feelings of sympathy" (Cameron and Payne 2011). Cameron and Payne (2011) noted that research on compassion fatigue increasingly suggested that what is seen as decreasing compassion is not a result of a limit in how much people can feel but may result from active self-regulation which is "required to stifle the moral impulse toward multiple victims in the service of self-interest". They also suggested that this information might indicate a way to reduce compassion fatigue: "Anything that encourages people to accept their emotions, rather than suppressing them, might reduce the collapse. Scads of studies show that a non-judgmental acceptance of our own emotions can be good for our health" (Cameron and Payne 2011).

While there is a great deal of evidence that health care professionals experience compassion fatigue, the application to media and media audiences is less well studied. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) expressed concern in their 1948 book about what they called

the “narcotizing dysfunction of the mass media,” which they said was the result of a vast supply of communications, which “may elicit only a superficial concern with the problems of society, and this superficiality often cloaks mass apathy” (p. 238). Studies of compassion fatigue as related to news content often point to [Sontag \(1977\)](#) as one of the first to acknowledge the power of images to overwhelm and ultimately reduce emotional responses to suffering. In *On Photography*, [Sontag \(1977\)](#) wrote of her experience seeing photos from Nazi concentration camps, “nothing I have ever seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously” (p. 20), but also suggested that exposure to suffering in images would lessen their “quality of feeling, including moral outrage” (p. 19). Of course, these were observations based on personal experience as a photographer, and not empirical research.

In the four decades since Sontag wrote about it, several researchers have pointed to the existence of compassion fatigue in the media and attempted to explain how it functions (see, e.g., [Moeller 2002](#)). Many of these studies, however, did not attempt to empirically show that compassion fatigue had taken place. In 1996, Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron conducted an empirical study of compassion fatigue and found evidence for the existence of a compassion fatigue problem among the general public, which was associated with lowered interest and emotional arousal, and in extreme cases, total media avoidance. [Kinnick et al. \(1996\)](#) concluded that “the nature of contemporary mass media is integral to the compassion fatigue problem” (p. 703), although they found some indication that the effect could dissipate with time.

3.2. Journalists and Compassion Fatigue

There is a long tradition of journalists attempting to expose suffering or tragedy as a way to inform the public and potentially influence policy. An early photojournalism project, [Riis \(1890\)](#) “How the other half lives”, sought to expose New Yorkers to the horrible conditions under which the poor of the city were living. A century later, this perspective was reflected by BBC war correspondent Martin Bell, who advocated for a “journalism of attachment”. Winners of Pulitzer Prizes for photography have included famous images of humans in the worst conditions—the starving child in Sudan, the Vietnamese girl running from a napalm attack. In 2015, the image of Syrian child Alan Kurdi’s body on the Turkish shore received huge media coverage and brought global attention to the issue of Syrian refugees’ suffering, at least briefly. In the face of research about compassion fatigue, however, these efforts may seem futile at best, and self-defeating at worst.

Critics point out that what many of these images have in common is the desire to put the suffering of another on display, as a kind of object of pity for voyeuristic examination. [Rosler \(1981\)](#) referred to this kind of portrayal as “victim photography,” arguing that these kinds of portrayals did little to challenge the systems that created them. [Rosler \(1981\)](#) suggested that the function of documentary was to “[carry] (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful” in a kind of fetishization of suffering, that ultimately allows the viewer to feel detached from any responsibility for the situation: “With the appropriate object to view, one no longer feels obligated to suffer empathy”.

3.3. Empathy

[Gerdes et al. \(2010\)](#), in their review of the literature on empathy, concluded that “there is a long history of dissimilar and often vague definitions of empathy in the literature” and that “different researchers have employed a host of disparate ways to measure empathy” (pp. 2326–27). In other words, both the conceptualization and measures of empathy have varied quite a bit. Many researchers point to or adapt some version of empathy “as having two main strands (1) cognitive empathy—‘the intellectual/imaginative apprehension of another’s mental state’ and (2) emotional empathy—‘an emotional response to . . . emotional responses of others’” ([Lawrence et al. 2004](#), p. 911). However, [Levenson and Ruef \(1992\)](#) identified three qualities of empathy in the literature: (i) knowing (cognitive) what a

person is feeling; (ii) feeling (affective) what another person is feeling; and (iii) responding compassionately to another person's distress. Finally, [Gerdes et al. \(2010\)](#) pointed to the research in social cognitive neuroscience, which suggests that there are four areas that must be activated for a person to experience empathy: affective sharing, self-awareness, mental flexibility and perspective taking, and emotional regulation.

[Hansen et al. \(2018\)](#) measured the impact of empathy over time and found that "the effects of feeling empathy, whether positive or negative, become less extreme over time," suggesting that "situations that initially are experienced as stressful can over time make the empathizer stronger". [Zaki \(2020\)](#) distinguished between empathic concern, or feeling concern for someone, and emotional empathy, which is feeling similarly to how someone else feels, and suggested that empathic concern may be more sustainable. [Coll et al. \(2017\)](#) noted that many of these definitions measure the end state and "overlook the fact that empathy is the result of a complex process requiring a number of intermediate processing steps" (p. 132). The authors argued for an alternative measurement framework, which considers the two steps: emotion identification and affect sharing. "[I]n order to demonstrate an empathic response, the Empathizer must be able to identify the Target's affective state accurately, and identification of the Target's state must cause the Empathizer to share this state" ([Coll et al. 2017](#), p. 133).

3.4. Empathy and Democracy

Ultimately, empathy is important not just for its own sake, but because it may be indicative of the underlying conditions necessary to a democratic, consensus-based society, that is, the ability to see and understand the needs and concerns of fellow humans, and to view their needs and concerns as valid. [Morrell \(2010\)](#) wrote that "empathy is not a feeling, but rather a process through which others' emotional states or situations affect us" (p. 41) and claimed that empathy could lead to "legitimate, justified democratic decision-making that truly takes all into consideration" (p. 194). Various philosophers have argued that democracy and empathy may be linked in a fundamental way. As [Boler \(1997\)](#) noted, "from John Dewey to Martha Nussbaum, Cornel West to bell hooks, we find empathy advocated as the foundation for democracy and social change" (p. 253). [Delgado \(2018\)](#) claimed, "Civility involves empathy. It is also fundamentally rooted in a need to listen, and listening is about recognizing that others may not think as you do" (p. 328). The relationship between empathy and democracy has even been tested empirically. [Miklikowska \(2012\)](#) suggested, "Empathy reflects individuals' needs of concern about others, which might resonate with democratic ideals" and concluded that "empathy explained a greater proportion of variance in SDV [support for democratic values] than many established variables" (p. 606). Inversely, she found that "as long as RWA [right wing authoritarianism] and psychological inflexibility are common, and empathy and interpersonal trust are low, democratic commitments are likely to be weak" ([Miklikowska 2012](#), p. 606).

3.5. Journalism and Empathy

The assertion that journalists ought to play a role in portraying a representative picture of the constituents of the society within which they work and contribute to an understanding of the people who make up that society has been made by several scholars and media observers. The Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the [Commission on Freedom of the Press \(1947\)](#) included in its list of responsibilities of a free press the obligation to "create a world community by giving men everywhere knowledge of the world and of one another, by promoting comprehension and appreciation of the goals of a free society that shall embrace all men". Likewise, [Kovach and Rosenstiel \(2001\)](#), in their canonical text about journalism, wrote that the press has an obligation to keep the news comprehensive and proportional, and "should include news from all our communities, not just those with demographics that are attractive to advertisers".

The Hutchins Commission explained the reasoning for this obligation: “if people are exposed to the inner truth of the life of a particular group, they will gradually build up respect for and understanding of it”. As referenced earlier, [Schudson \(2013\)](#) called this “social empathy”: “stories that—often in a human-interest vein—inform citizens about neighbors and groups they may not know or understand”. On the flip side, lack of representation may result in a kind of removal from public imagination. [Gerbner and Gross \(1976\)](#) used the term “symbolic annihilation” to describe the erasure of those who don’t appear in the media: “Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation”.

3.6. The Contact Hypothesis

The justification for the obligation to represent members of a society to each other is supported by research on what is referred to as the “contact hypothesis”, which posits that contact with people from different groups can reduce prejudice against those groups. Research on contact between different groups has shown that it can reduce prejudice on the part of the majority towards minority groups, including racial minorities, ([Pettigrew 1998](#)), gay men ([Turner et al. 2007](#)), and disabled people ([Pettigrew et al. 2011](#)). A meta-analysis of intergroup contact studies found evidence to support the conclusion that contact typically reduces prejudice, but that the effects vary ([Paluck et al. 2019](#)). Significantly for media and journalists, studies have also shown positive effects of imagined contact rather than actual contact. These parasocial contact studies suggest that exposure to characters from “outgroups” in storybooks and on television can elicit sympathy and reduce prejudice, just as face-to-face interactions do ([Schiappa et al. 2005](#)).

Journalism is, in many conceptualizations, also strongly linked with democracy, and the need to inform citizens about their government (as articulated by Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001), as well as to promote consensus and understanding among citizens, for the purpose of enabling democratic government (as put forth in the report of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947). As the literature cited above suggests, civility and empathy are linked, and are necessary conditions for a functioning democracy. If journalists are to serve the interests of democracy, they have a responsibility to promote understanding among the constituent groups of the democracy within which they work.

In many ways, journalism is already deeply linked to emotions, both through the reactions that drive journalists to cover particular stories, and how journalists present those stories to audiences. But more attention has recently been given to the emotional effects of journalism, in part because of the growth of technology. As information moves more quickly, [Shirky \(2009\)](#) argued that this makes information-processing more emotional: “As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think”. [Beckett and Deuze \(2016\)](#) have suggested that “Emotion drives people’s increasingly intimate relationships with technology, fuels engagement with news and information, and inspires professionals to pursue careers in an industry that offers anything but reliable rewards for work well done” (p. 2). They cite evidence that emotional cues get consumers’ attention and so prolong the highly valued metric of engagement, such as [Pantti’s \(2010\)](#) finding that stories with emotional images get more traffic.

The effects of social media content and social media interactions on users’ empathy merits attention and some research has specifically attempted to measure the influence of social media on empathy. [Vossen and Valkenburg \(2016\)](#) found that “adolescents’ social media use improved both their ability to understand (cognitive empathy) and share the feelings of their peers (affective empathy)”. Relevant to the influence of HONY, [Keib et al. \(2016\)](#) examined the influence of photographs in social media posts on emotion, attention, and selection and found support for “the notion that audiences will actively engage with content that elicits emotional arousal”. [Keib et al. \(2016\)](#) also found some evidence that positive images are more effective in eliciting responses on social media. [Mortensen and Gade \(2018\)](#), comparing news images before and after the layoff of professional photojournalists argued that “professionals are better at capturing intimate, emotional, and

graphically appealing images than non-professional photographers”, which may explain why HONY is particularly successful—the feed is not the work of amateurs simply sharing photos of friends, but it also doesn’t feature traditional news reporting.

3.7. *Humans of New York*

The HONY social media feed has been in existence for a decade, generally updated every few days or even every day with a photo and accompanying caption. Launched in late 2010 by Brandon Stanton as a solo project to gather portraits of New Yorkers and map them, the project evolved over its first few years, shifting from a perspective that privileged Stanton’s observations and commentary to one that privileged the voices of the people he was photographing (Roberts 2019). In its current form, which has been consistent since about 2014, almost every post features a picture of a subject with a short excerpt from a conversation they had with Stanton. Roberts (2019) argued that Stanton has adopted and performed the public service ideal of professional journalists, and should be considered if not a journalist, *per se*, at least upholding the traditional values of journalists. The feed is widely followed, with 10.6 million followers on Instagram and more than 18 million likes on its Facebook page as of August 2020. The project also has several copycats around the world (generally named “Humans of” whatever city they’re in). Stanton has also photographed people in several other cities and at least 40 countries (Stanton 2020).

HONY is perhaps notable in that the creator specifically captions the photos with words of the subject, as if they are speaking directly to the audience and sharing their personal experiences. The subjects are generally presented free of any confounding news context, or when they are selected because of their experience with a particular news event (as was the case when Stanton photographed people after Hurricane Sandy or traveled to refugee camps to photograph people there), the news event is not the most salient aspect of their HONY post, if it is even mentioned. For example, Stanton said in an interview about his trip to profile residents of Boston after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing: “The media from all over the country was in Boston. I’m the only dude who spent a week there and didn’t ask a single person about the bombings. Media naturally gravitates towards drama ... I just try to show normalcy” (University College Dublin 2014).

HONY is an appropriate object of study about the ability to cultivate empathy and reduce compassion fatigue because, as Perreault and Paul (2018) concluded, the feed’s creator selects frames that make his subjects seem similar to his presumed audience. The posts humanize the subjects and highlight the common aspects of their lives that viewers might relate to, rather than highlighting their suffering or pain. In Perreault and Paul’s (2018) analysis of the HONY portrayal of Syrian refugees, they found three prevalent narrative frames: “the Syrian refugee as skilled, normalized and as ideologically American” (p. 92). Perreault and Paul (2018) explained the normalized frame as follows: “In the narrative frame of the normalized refugee, the emphasis is the refugee’s ‘normalcy’ in that all tertiary elements of the photographs are pointedly normal: flowers, pets, families, western clothing” (p. 93) and contrasted that framing with media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis that has emphasized limited, negative portrayals. They did note some commonalities between HONY and traditional media coverage of Syrian refugees in terms of the elements of compassion fatigue, namely sensational emphasis through the visual references, and American angles. Nonetheless, “the individual refugee is presented in a different manner than refugees are traditionally—the protagonists are presented with individual agency, control and composure” (Perreault and Paul 2018, p. 93).

An analysis by Wang et al. (2017) found that the most frequently appearing topics of HONY posts were family, career, and romantic relationships. The posts that create the most engagement are those that feature family, education, and romantic relationships, while the people featured in posts were considered most likeable when the captions were about romantic relationships and education, and the topics related to dreams or aspirations received the most likes (Wang et al. 2017). The authors suggested that the topics shape the tone of the caption and, as a result, how many people comment on, like, or share it.

Vesselinov et al. (2019) analyzed 130,000 comments on HONY posts to determine whether the site might foster a community and found that “the overwhelming majority of comments offer emotional support and encouragement” (p. 2) and that “HONY fans are much more engaged with Affective and Social Processes compared to concerns about work, achievement, money or religion” (p. 12). The authors argued that HONY is creating a more humane, positive, and supportive environment, and suggested that HONY comment trajectories “seem to instantiate this idea of alignment: positivity leads to more positivity, as positive comments lead to other positive comments over time” (Vesselinov et al. 2019, p. 17). They found this trajectory across posts from three countries, suggesting that the emotional response is the same regardless of the national origin of the subject or the commenter.

While others have pointed out problems with the portrayals in the feed “masking structural patterns of exploitation or oppression” (Erdener 2016), this is not a primary concern in this analysis, and in fact may be part of why HONY is effective in creating empathy for subjects, rather than compassion fatigue. If the posts reveal the humanity of their subjects by telling stories that the audience may relate to (romance, family, etc.), it is perhaps inevitable that they ignore structural exploitation or oppression, and this may in fact make them more likely to contribute to empathy towards those people without the more draining emotions associated with confronting structural issues. This is not to say, of course, that those issues are not important—they must be addressed—but a pragmatic approach to human psychology and emotional response might suggest that a more effective way to ensure that they will be addressed is by not placing them front and center in coverage. That is what this study hopes to help understand.

3.8. *Humans of New York, the Contact Hypothesis, and Empathy*

Yousaf and Fan (2020) specifically sought to apply the contact hypothesis to HONY posts about Pakistan and Iran, finding that humanizing these otherwise stigmatized places through presenting universally shared values “enhances the perceived similarity with another distant group and enable people to associate to them in an impartial way” (p. 674). They emphasized the importance of humanizing members of a stigmatized group in allowing people to relate to the group better, appealing to feelings of similarity, universal emotions, and shared circumstances. They concluded that humanizing stigmatized places “is pertinent to instilling empathy in a global audience that has long been inured to the reports of religious fanaticism, terrorism, violence, repressive politics and patriarchalism” (Yousaf and Fan 2020, p. 674). Although they were primarily interested in the implications for destination marketers and scholars, their findings nonetheless point to the effectiveness of HONY and the potential for journalists. They suggested that alternative media like HONY could offer more innovative means of engagement, but this paper argues that traditional media have the ability and responsibility to do so.

An exploratory study by Wheeler and Quinn (2017) found evidence for empathetic expressions in audience responses to a small sample of HONY posts. They suggested that HONY “provides a distinct opportunity to examine empathetic expression and virtual intergroup contact as the HONY community is a rare social media-based vehicle for connecting with strangers on an unprecedented worldwide scale” (Wheeler and Quinn 2017). This study aimed to build on that, to determine whether HONY might promote prosocial reactions without provoking compassion fatigue. The hope is that this kind of representation could help journalists and others telling community stories to more effectively connect communities to each other and contribute to the cultivation of empathy for fellow community members and the creation of community bonds that will make democracy more effective, without leading audiences to turn away from the news.

The overall assessment of HONY comments provided by the linguistic analysis is that they are exceedingly positive in tone, balanced in analytical versus narrative/personal thinking, not particularly revealing on a personal level, and high in confidence, but not asserting social status. Regarding the question of whether HONY cultivates empathy, defined as emotion identification and affect sharing: the results of the LIWC analysis are not defini-

tive. There appears to be evidence for affect identification in the emotional expressions, but affect sharing is not necessarily evident, particularly given that the authenticity score was low. However, regarding the question of whether this kind of content may represent a counter to compassion fatigue, the results showing the confident, positive tone, as well as the focus on others, and balance of “I” and “you” pronouns (Kacewicz et al. 2014) indicate that HONY posts elicit positive emotions.

3.9. Takeaways for Journalists

The consistently positive comments posted by HONY followers could be significant, in part because the tone of comments shapes others’ responses and tone, and has a carry-on positive effect, and in part because it could serve as an example for journalists and others seeking to report on challenges faced by communities without causing audiences to turn away. If these results prove consistent through further study, HONY could offer an example for journalists to follow in terms of their representation of the public. Research has pointed out that HONY subjects talk about topics that are commonplace and easy to relate to, while representing people who are not always centered in media coverage. When they do discuss suffering or challenges, it is often in the context of how they overcame them. The implication for journalists is therefore that, when reporting on problems or even tragedies, they ought to emphasize aspects of people’s stories that others can relate to, which are not tied to the difficulties they immediately face. This also implies that it will be more productive for journalists to seek to portray members of the community to each other not only when they are suffering or facing challenges. That kind of representation provides parasocial contact for members of the public, without placing people in positions of inferiority or making them the subject of pity.

One crucial aspect that is suggested by this and other studies of HONY follower comments is that positivity begets more positivity. This may be challenging for journalists to replicate without taking a more active approach to content moderation or fostering the kind of community that will respond more positively. Perhaps only allowing subscribers to make some of the first comments on stories will limit the negative effect of those who seek to derail public discussions or criticize others.

In order to come to more conclusive results, further research and interpretation of comments is needed, such as comparison with comments on other social media feeds. Perhaps the most effective method would be future studies directly asking HONY followers about their response to the content, modeled on parasocial contact studies done related to the contact hypothesis.

4. Materials and Methods

This study selected a random sample of HONY posts from over a year and analyzed them using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program, which analyzes text and calculates the percentage of words that match several language dimensions. “The program has 68 pre-set dimensions (output variables) including linguistic dimensions, word categories tapping psychological constructs, and personal concern categories, and can accommodate user-defined dimensions as well” (Pennebaker et al. 2001). LIWC is perhaps best understood not as a definitive measure of the linguistic content of a particular text, but as a general measure of the trends.

The comments for analysis were gathered manually from [instagram.com/humansofny/](https://www.instagram.com/humansofny/), from posts dating from May 2020 to 15 April 2021. Five posts per month were randomly selected, using a random number generator to guide the selection of posts from that month. Posts were also coded for the gender presentation, race, and topic. The posts in the sample included a drastic overrepresentation of female subjects, and a slight overrepresentation of white subjects, although this was less marked than the gender imbalance, and difficult to determine, given that the location of posts was not just New York, but also Poland and others. The topics shared by the subjects included relationships, but also illness, suicide, addiction,

child abuse, physical disability, and other challenges. That is, the stories were often about challenges and difficulties that were not tied to race or gender.

For each post, an average of 140 comments were collected for analysis. This resulted in a total of 8350 comments initially. During data cleaning, any obvious spam posts were removed, and duplicates, as well as posts containing unintelligible symbols or non-Roman alphabet symbols were also removed. In the case of non-verbal symbols (mostly emojis), these were counted prior to removal. Following this process, 8172 comments were left for analysis, totaling 89,327 words. These words were entered in the LIWC software for analysis, and the results of that analysis are explained in the results section. The appearance of spam, posts asking for money, or promoting other accounts suggests that comments are not moderated, although the author was not able to confirm.

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