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Technology Brings Humanistic Care: An Exclusive Interview with Zeng Hua, Head of Toutiao’s Public Welfare Missing Persons Program (Post-print)

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Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Full Text

Interview with Zeng Hua: Technology Brings Humanistic Care

China Media Technology: The “Toutiao Missing Persons” initiative officially launched in February 2016 and has since helped 2,147 missing individuals reunite with their families. How did Toutiao initially conceive this public welfare idea?

Zeng Hua: We had been pushing missing person content quite early on. Around 2015, we collaborated with “Baby Come Home,” a nonprofit that provided us with missing person information which we helped disseminate, though not yet as a systematic project—just as regular news. As a content distribution platform, we noticed these stories attracted extremely high attention. With many families having only one child, a missing child becomes a city-wide concern. We increased our push of such news between 2015 and early 2016, but without significant results. Then on Chinese New Year’s Day in February 2016, an elderly woman went missing in Yanjiao, Hebei. I was on duty that day, and an intern saw the news on Weibo and alerted me. I pushed the information as a pop-up notification to all Toutiao users in Langfang City. That evening, the family received clues from two Toutiao users and found the woman near Sanhe Railway Station. When we later reviewed cases, we realized finding children could be difficult—they might run away from home, be abducted, or drown accidentally, complicating searches. Elderly missing persons, however, were mostly just lost, typically due to Alzheimer’s disease or unfamiliarity with city roads, and generally remained within a fixed area. So we shifted our focus

toward finding the elderly and people with intellectual or mental disabilities. To better serve this mission, we established a dedicated missing persons project.

China Media Technology: What innovations does “Toutiao Missing Persons” offer in big data, information security, and LBS?

Zeng Hua: LBS is not a new technology—all internet companies use it. We simply apply LBS with extreme precision to missing person location. When an elderly person goes missing, we only push notifications within a five to ten kilometer radius. Other internet companies typically target entire cities without such precise LBS application. Toutiao was the first in China to apply LBS technology to public welfare, combining it with content push in a way that aligns perfectly with our product characteristics. Our headquarters has a dedicated technical team developing this.

China Media Technology: What is the operational model of “Toutiao Missing Persons”?

Zeng Hua: Missing persons is an independent project under the Content Operations Department, which originally handled news push and external cooperation. The project evolved from the news push division and primarily sends missing person information daily. Beyond content push, we also expand our own business and seek partnerships with civil affairs departments, public security organs, rescue stations, and public welfare organizations. Cooperation with public security includes working with local public security management bureaus and police stations. When families report cases, they provide us with leads immediately, solving our information source problem. In July last year, we signed a cooperation agreement with rescue stations. There are over 2,000 social assistance management stations under the civil affairs system that receive suspected missing persons, and we help them return home in reverse. On one hand, we help police find missing people; on the other, we cooperate with rescue stations to help find families. We also partner with social rescue teams and public welfare organizations to mobilize more social forces to spread information. Blue Sky Rescue is probably the largest civilian rescue team in China, and many local teams help us with searches.

China Media Technology: What impact does the public welfare column “Toutiao Missing Persons” have on Toutiao’s main news business? Does it require substantial human and financial investment? How are human resource costs controlled and coordinated?

Zeng Hua: The missing persons column started with two or three people and has grown to fifteen or sixteen. The cost of pushing missing person information—if converted to advertising revenue—would be substantial for the company. However, the company strongly supports us with no commercial assessment, allowing us to pursue pure public welfare without significant cost constraints on human or financial resources.

China Media Technology: What trends or trajectory do you think future

news app platforms will follow?

Zeng Hua: That’s a broad question. For Toutiao, our main business remains content consultation, distribution, and precise push. The missing persons column is something we gradually developed that fits our product characteristics very well and represents a meaningful attempt at brand promotion. Facts have proven we’ve achieved some results.

China Media Technology: As more people emphasize personal privacy protection, does “Toutiao Missing Persons” pay attention to ethical issues?

Zeng Hua: Toutiao itself performs precise content push based on users’ reading habits—content distribution. The missing persons column only reads users’ location information, nothing else. As long as users share their location information themselves, we can perform precise push. If users disable location information through phone settings, we cannot read it. These are all based on users’ own settings. As an internet company, we attach great importance to and protect user privacy. We won’t do anything else regarding other missing persons columns.

China Media Technology: Will “Toutiao Missing Persons” business scope expand to county-level regions?

Zeng Hua: Our search scope covers anywhere Toutiao has users, including overseas. There’s no county-level distinction. Precision push means that as long as a location can be found on a map, we can accurately locate it. Current precision push can basically locate to a building, a street, or a village.

China Media Technology: What new directions will the column take? What advice can you give to other industry peers?

Zeng Hua: Although the workload of missing persons is large, it doesn’t affect our main news page. The daily push volume for missing persons is very small compared to news. We also try not to disturb users, setting a limit of five pushes per day for ordinary users, seven at most. When pushing, we avoid duplicate notifications in the same area. Since pushes are map-based, if a missing person notification was sent to an area in the morning, the afternoon case will use a different channel, such as weighted push through the Beijing channel instead of pop-ups. We recommend that Beijing users see this information first when browsing news. We avoid disturbing users with pop-ups by adjusting the missing range for precise push. Besides missing persons, we’re trying other initiatives. For example, we recently pushed a lost property notification to help two recent graduates find their diploma and degree certificate. Later, we’ll establish standards for what can be searched for. We’re also cooperating with the Ministry of Public Security and courts for pursuit, such as tracking down hit-and-run drivers based on license plate numbers, or pursuing debt defaulters when court judgments cannot be enforced. These are future attempts. Simultaneously, we’ll expand business in Taiwan and overseas regions. Through colleagues in Taiwan and cooperation with relevant Taiwanese media, we’ll help

elderly people in Taiwan find relatives and locate mainland relatives. We'll also help overseas adoptive families find the biological parents of adopted children. Currently, the Taiwan family search project has a high success rate, though we still need to raise demand and call on veterans or their descendants to come to Toutiao for collection. The missing persons column is also negotiating cooperation with third-party clients like JD.com and ofo, so our missing person information can also be read on other clients.

China Media Technology: According to media reports, Tencent and Alibaba are also doing similar public welfare missing person projects. What are Toutiao's differences and advantages compared to them?

Zeng Hua: Alibaba cooperated with the Ministry of Public Security's Criminal Investigation Bureau to create an emergency release platform for missing children, essentially building a system for public security departments. All missing child reports can be entered into this system, and its data interface is open to all internet companies—we've also connected to it. Internet companies that want to conduct missing person searches are welcome, and we won't exclude providing information to Tencent, Alibaba, or NetEase in the future. Alibaba focuses only on children, while Toutiao covers children, the elderly, and people with mental or intellectual disabilities—those without civil capacity. Toutiao doesn't handle cases involving people with full civil capacity. Tencent is running QQ City Help through QQ; WeChat hasn't launched a similar service yet. In this field, cooperation outweighs competition.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.