

ARKHumanity app saves lives one tweet at a time



Photo by ARKHumanity | Promotional photo

ARKHumanity is a crisis-intervention tool that searches for tweets containing crisis-related language and connects their authors with resources to help them.

By Jenny Ung | 09/07/15 8:00pm

A group of five students, joined together by Hacks 4 Humanity, is developing an app to save lives using the power of the Internet.

ARKHumanity is a mechanism that searches for specific tweets using crisis keywords and getting the person resources and help.

The team, composed of a combination of doctoral students, undergraduate students and community leaders, met each other at Project Humanities' Hacks 4 Humanity, a hackathon focused on incorporating technology into humanities studies.

Starting off with 10 people sitting around a table, team member Kacie McCollum said half of the group did not like how the team's discussion was developing. However, the other five decided that the goal of the hackathon was to understand the principles of humanity and apply them to real life situations.

"We wanted the opportunity to see what we could produce for the humanities, so we started talking about shared experiences and commonalities," McCollum said.

One commonality was the fact that they had all been to school, though at different times, McCollum noted. However, that was not what the group chose to focus on.

"We started sharing experiences with the loss of people, especially in the realm of academia," McCollum said.

All of the team members had lost friends to suicide.

Doctoral student Jordan Bates, the team leader, then mentioned an application developed in Chicago relating to food poisoning and social media. The app flags for food poisoning-related tweets and sends them to Chicago's Department of Public Health's online form.

"We started talking about what could be a good use of this service, which is monitoring Twitter in that way and we decided that detecting when people are considering suicide could be a important use of that technology," Bates said.

"We were thinking of applying social media and big data to suicide prevention because Bin (Hong Lee), another team member, brought up that when a (person) wants to commit suicide, they might post a suicidal message," team member and biology student Pat Pataranutaporn said. "So we wanted to reach out to those people that have Twitter."

Throughout the hackathon, the team searched for crisis keywords, such as phrases like "kill myself" or "shoot myself."

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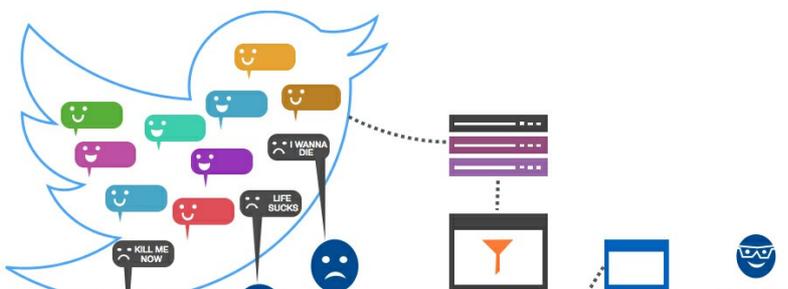
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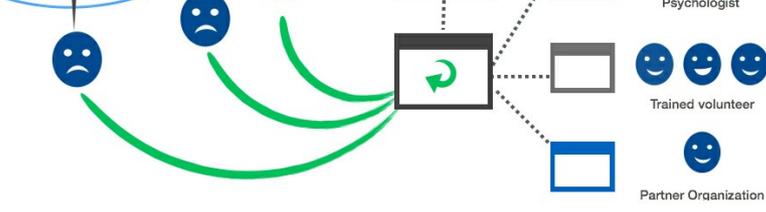
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To their surprise, the ARKHumanity team won Hacks 4 Humanity.

"It wasn't really our goal to win," Bates said. "We just wanted to work on something really interesting and worthwhile."

After winning, the team decided they wanted to continue working and developing the app. They settled down in the Memorial Union, and later, at Changemaker Central. A student worker in Changemaker Central began speaking to the team, encouraging them to use the space and apply to the Changemaker Challenge.

ARKHumanity ended up winning the \$10,000 prize.

The team has been using the prize money for the app's complicated infrastructure and to present the technology at various conferences, Bates and Pataranutaporn said.

"We are focused on making the system more advanced from the one we had before," Pataranutaporn said.

Pataranutaporn is also focused on creating the user interface.

"We've been working on building up a platform which is collected based on keywords, filter those down through an algorithm — which will be more complex than just a keyword filter — and then, from there, the set of candidates will be shown to volunteers at a suicide hotline," Bates said. "Those volunteers can then look at the tweet and confirm that this is actually something concerning. If so, a counselor can reach out."

The team hopes to complete the app by this spring, Bates said.

The first trial will be done with Teen Lifeline, a teen crisis service, McCollum said. The organization will be the first to try out the app and help refine it.

Hacks 4 Humanity will be held on Oct. 3 and 4.

CORRECTION: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this story labeled Kacie McCollum as a student at ASU. This version of the story has been updated with the correction information.

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The screenshot shows the top portion of a web browser window displaying the website 'The State Press'. The browser's address bar is partially visible at the top. The website's header is dark red with the 'The State Press' logo in white serif font on the left and a search icon on the right. Below the header is a white banner with a red and blue advertisement for '50th Anniversary' at 'MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE', featuring the text '\$84 per Credit Hour* *In-county tuition'. Below the banner is a news article with the headline 'ARKHumanity app saves lives one tweet at a time'. The browser's scrollbar is visible on the right side of the screenshot.