

TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN

STRAIGHT FACED

The 'Humans of' Facebook pages aim to represent places as they are, without cultural stereotyping. The trend is catching on, and Hong Kong has recently joined the movement, reports Jenni Marsh

In the twilight, two teenage skateboarders flick the peace sign under a streetlamp. One wears a black beret and neck scarf, the other a red T-shirt bearing the American flag.

Welcome to Tehran. The Iranian capital is often viewed through the prism of stories about nuclear ambitions and outspoken grand ayatollahs. But an internet phenomenon is debunking myths about Tehran, and giving those who are curious a virtual visa to explore the ancient city.

Shirin Barghi, a trainee journalist who grew up in Iran and studied in New York, founded the Facebook page Humans of Tehran in 2011. It has since gone viral.

The concept was simple: she would upload snapshots of everyday life in the city of 8.3 million people, shooting things viewers wouldn't know about Iran, and showing them things they wouldn't expect.

Since then, her camera has captured Afghan refugees, street musicians in Nike tops, men dressed as the sooty-faced ancient Zoroastrian fire-keeper Hâjji Firuz, and shop assistants setting up a Christmas tree in a Tommy Hilfiger store window.

The page's tagline reads "Tehran is not as far away as



This Sindhi woman flashes a smile for Humans of Karachi.

you think". Barghi says: "The image people have of Iran is so demonised and divorced from the reality of the people there. I thought this sort of project was a really good way of showing normal people in Tehran."

Two years later, her site has 124,000 likes on Facebook and has spawned copycats around the world. Photographers from Aruba

to Hyderabad, Jerusalem to Kurdistan, and Tokyo to Venice have been setting up their own "Humans of" pages.

The origin of the idea can be traced back to American photographer Brandon Stanton. After taking out a college loan to place an early US\$3,000 bet on Barack Obama becoming US president, Stanton caught the banking world's attention, and was headhunted as a bond trader. But he aborted his career in finance in 2010, and embarked on a "photographic census" of New York City, one human at a time.

He began with Ruben Lora, a 43-year-old maintenance worker, who was sitting outside a bar with four bottles of washing powder at his feet.

Lora told him about his previous life playing baseball in the Dominican Republic, until a motorcycle accident ended his career. "I don't know why I'm telling you this," Lora said.

From that moment, Stanton always engaged with the strangers he shot on the street. Each picture featured a quote or a story from the subject. His blog - Humans of New York - quickly went viral, and spawned a bestselling book of the same name.

With New York in his web, Stanton travelled to Iran. He photographed a man who had discovered dinosaur

bones in the country, an Iranian cleric who spoke well of American people (but badly of their government). He found nomadic tribes roaming the Zagros Mountains, maintaining an ancient Persian way of life.

One day, while he was walking in a blizzard on a snowy Tehran



In Tehran, men dress as the Zoroastrian fire-keeper Hâjji Firuz.



In Tokyo it isn't just high-heeled fashionistas who like to give their well-groomed dogs a ride around the city.



Dani Walker photographed this flour vendor in Owino Market, Kampala, after being struck by her upbeat attitude to life.

roof top, a man shouted up to him: "Hey, I love your Facebook page!"

Today, there are about 500 "Humans of" sites. They range in size from the ambitious Humans of China, to the micro-site Humans of Bedford, which shines a spotlight on a tiny British town. The Humans of Hong Kong page started last month, and has about 800 likes so far.

Everyone has a story to tell. Bobbie Jean Peachy is a 76-year-old grandmother living in Phoenix, Arizona, and the perfect illustration of this project's broad appeal. The retired secretary is the self-appointed curator of the global internet phenomenon, maintaining the Humans of Everywhere Big List, the only comprehensive index of the sites.

She says: "To me, it's like these people became part of my own neighbourhood. Their places in a far off world became familiar. I have no clue as to why I got so addicted to searching and finding and viewing more people to see how they live, but I did."

Many "Humans of" founders were already amateur street photographers. Finding the title gave them an established channel through which to express their ethnography.

Dani Walker has been taking pictures in Kampala, Uganda, for years. "My husband found the Humans of New York website, and he knew I would like it. It's a beautiful project as it showcases the diversity of people," she says. Walker set up Portraits of

Every human being wants to be seen ... in an authentic way, seen as they are

PAUL PIEBINGA, HUMANS OF UTRECHT



Humans of Tokyo caught this brightly attired couple on their way to an "orange party".

Kampala, battling Uganda's intermittent internet to maintain the site. She loves photographing the boda boda motorcycle taxis, but her favourite shot is of an old woman who sells flour in Owino Market. Walker found her dancing and laughing while at work without any music.

"I've been thanked by many Ugandans for the way that Portraits of Kampala gives a positive glimpse of the people here," Walker says. "The media often portrays a single narrative about Africa - as a vast land with exotic animals, poor and diseased people, and a lot of war. In fact, Uganda is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world, and has Christianity, Islam, Baha'i and Judaism, and Jainism."

Khaula Jamil, a former Fulbright scholar and videographer, feels his Humans of Karachi site - with pictures of magicians, healthy school kids and parkour practitioners - serves a similar role. "The media tells you things like 'All Pakistanis are terrorists.' I would invite anyone to visit Humans of Karachi to see how wrong you are."

But to pigeonhole the "Humans of" craze as a public relations vehicle for developing nations would be narrow-sighted. Filippo Callegaro, a 28-year-old medical student, wants to capture the Venetians who live in the water alleys away from the tourist sites; Paul Piebinga, 56, of Utrecht, in the Netherlands, posts on Facebook at 5pm each day and

"doesn't worry where the project is going".

Jon Apted's Fiji page feeds those who have escaped the politically unstable but idyllic island with a reminder of home; in Dallas, Travis Montgomery's shot of a couple crying ended up being used on their wedding invitation - they had just got engaged.

In Bangkok, excitement is now mounting for a new project. Zon Mattawan Sutjarittharak, head of the city's "Humans of" chapter, is engaging in the Humans of Planet Earth project.

Established at the end of 2013 by New Zealand-American photographer Brandon Van Slyke, the project aims to bring together 100 photographers in 100 locations to create a collective of stories from around the world. So far, more than 65 "Humans of" photographers have signed up.

Many find it hard to articulate the wildfire quality of the "Humans of" phenomenon, but Utrecht's Piebinga thinks it's simple. "Every human being wants to be seen. Seen in an authentic way, seen as they are."

Sharon Cheung, the 20-year-old founder of Humans of Hong Kong, says: "Often, we sit next to strangers on the MTR, yet we don't know anything about them. "The culture here is to avoid conversations with strangers, but I hope through Humans of HK, people will see the diversity right where they live and breathe." jenni.marsh@scmp.com

SPACE

Scientists hard at work to prevent the next big bang

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Can asteroid collisions with the earth be prevented? After last February's events in Russia - which saw a 10-metre-wide rock explode over the town of Chelyabinsk - asteroid detection has become a hotbed of research, and it's already turning up worrying results.

Asteroids as big as Chelyabinsk's are classed as city-killers, but its high-altitude explosion caused only smashed windows - though about 1,500 people were injured.

Worryingly, researchers at University of Western Ontario, Canada, reported that the chances of detecting it were almost zero.

Meteors of this size are usually spotted by large telescopes about two hours before impact, but for Chelyabinsk - a city of one million - that was impossible because it was approaching from the sun's direction.

Scientists painstakingly checked more than six million images for traces of the meteor, and found nothing. They concluded that only about 500 of the estimated 20 million near-earth asteroids the size of the Chelyabinsk impactor have been discovered so far.

About 620,000 asteroids in our solar system have been catalogued and are tracked by astronomers, but NASA estimates that more than six million objects orbit the sun.

While some scientists are focused on how to prevent relatively small - though potentially lethal - asteroids like that in Chelyabinsk, others concentrate on one-kilometre (and bigger) sized comets that could wipe out the human race.

About 860 big objects capable of such destruction have been identified, although only about 155 are seen as life-threateningly big - that is, about 10 kilometres wide.

While current technology can't consistently detect small asteroids, the big epoch-ending-sized comets that swoop through the solar system are generally spotted about two years before they come anywhere near earth.

That's down to projects such as Pan-Starrs (Panoramic Survey Telescope and Rapid Response System), which looks for destructive asteroids.

The biggest such event in recorded history was in Tunguska, a remote area of Russia, in 1908. Like in Chelyabinsk, the asteroid burst overhead in an explosion estimated to have been about 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The shockwave devastated more than 2,150 square kilometres, knocking down 80 million trees.

Plans for coping with impacts in metropolitan areas are beginning to materialise. Since Chelyabinsk there's been an increase in research by astronomers.

Governments are becoming interested, too. The United Nations' Action Team on Near Earth Objects proposed in October an International Asteroid Warning Network be created.

The NASA-funded Atlas (Asteroid Terrestrial-Impact Last Alert System), due in 2015, will use eight telescopes to scan the entire night sky for asteroids.

Astronomers at the University of Hawaii say the equipment could be situated on its islands. The station could

provide a week's notice of a Chelyabinsk-type asteroid.

But once you've found an earth-bound asteroid, what do you do? Total evaporation is the thinking behind De-Star - or Directed Energy Solar Targeting of Asteroids and Exploration.

It envisages a spacecraft as big as the International Space Station which can store enough solar power to fire laser beams at incoming celestial debris. But even the biggest and costliest array - a six-mile-long spacecraft called De-Star 4 - would take an entire year to destroy a 500-metre-wide asteroid.

Evaporation isn't strictly necessary. A mere deflection or redirection of an asteroid away from Earth would do just as well.

Using lasers to nudge off course any asteroids that threatened earth has been mooted several times, most recently by Dr Richard Fork, an

electrical and computer engineering professor at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, the US.

Other ideas include using giant solar sails to shield a large asteroid from the sun, thus slightly changing its trajectory.

Meanwhile, NASA advocates simply using a spacecraft's gravitational pull to put an asteroid off-course. This would require a spacecraft to first crash into the object, as NASA did in

Astronomy is perhaps the last science where amateurs have a vital role to play



Illustration: Oliver Raw

the "citizen science" gathered from the NASA tie-up to help look for dangerous or valuable asteroids.

Planetary Resources is a wholly private venture, with name investors, including Virgin Group chairman Richard Branson, and Google chief executive Larry Page.

"Our mission is to prospect and mine asteroids to address one of the paramount problems faced on earth and beyond - resource scarcity," Lewicki writes on the company's website. He says our collective impression that space travel is inherently difficult is wrong.

"The massive controlled explosions, also known as rockets, used to push every ounce of cargo through our atmosphere into orbit leave a biased impression that all other solutions to developing a thriving space ecosystem must be equally hard," he says.

His point is that almost everything else that happens in space - like raising the orbit of the ISS, landing on the moon, and exploring other planets - aren't actually that difficult. "It is getting to the doorstep of outer space that is nearly impossible," he says.

But even that is "infinitely more achievable when access is fuelled by the resources present in near-infinite quantities on asteroids," Lewicki says.

Whether by using lasers to nudge them closer to us, or even via a giant lasso to bring them into earth's orbit, Planetary Resources plans to physically move asteroids into position for easier access, even though the prospect of bringing such dangerous objects closer to us is a risky business.

Get your calculations wrong, and the insurance bill could be sky-high.