

Chapter 14

Happiness in the Digital World



Abstract Spending a large number of hours on the Internet has positive and negative effects on subjective well-being. Social network users tend to compare their income to those with whom they interact, leading to less satisfaction with their own income. People with a strong inclination to be “liked” on Facebook are less satisfied with the life they lead and feel lonelier. Hours spent on online social networks are negatively correlated with happiness. The overall consequences on subjective well-being of these far-reaching digital developments are yet unknown.

Internet Use

Many people all over the world have access to the Internet and spend a large number of hours with it. Its effects on subjective well-being are divergent. Some studies find positive effects on individuals’ social interactions; they visit theatres, opera, and art exhibitions and meet relatives, friends, and acquaintances more often. Based on an aggregate index of digitization taking into account aspects such as ubiquity, price, reliability and speed it has been claimed that a higher level of this index is associated with higher life satisfaction. But this only holds once a certain level of digitization has been reached.

On the other hand, trust in other people seems to be reduced, which hampers happiness. One reason is that the Internet reduces self-regulation and self-awareness, which increases aggressive and offensive behaviours in face-to-face interactions. People who regularly visit the Internet as a source of information derive lower satisfaction from their income. This effect can be attributed to reducing people’s life satisfaction when they compare their own income with that of other people.

The use of social network sites has strongly increased over the last decade. Facebook is by far the most popular online social network and is used by no less than seventy-one per cent of US Americans. Multi-platform use is as well increasing markedly. Social network users are more likely to compare their income to those with whom they interact, leading to less satisfaction with their own income. In addition, self-esteem is hampered. People with a strong inclination to be “liked” on Facebook

are less satisfied with the life they lead. Empirical evidence points to a negative association between the hours spent on an online social network and happiness; users indeed feel lonelier.

The digital world has also led to mass surveillance of everyone, not only actual or suspected terrorists. The secret services of many countries, in particular the American CIA, FBI, NSA and others, have spent billions of dollars to infiltrate our computers, smart phones, TVs and cars on a regular basis. The large digital firms located in the Silicon Valley—Google, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple—each day syphon off terabytes of data from ordinary consumers and users of the Internet. Indeed, most people have a “digital double”, a black box fed with our personal data but without our permission.

Social bots, or robotic bloggers, influence and distort our views about consumer goods and services and politics in a much stronger way than propaganda and censorship did in the past. Digital technology threatens democracy, which many techies consider to be outmoded, and tends to replace it by a data-driven benevolent dictatorship. The most extreme development has occurred in the People’s Republic of China. The “citizen score” reduces all the data collected about a person to a single number summarizing your activities as employee, in your leisure time, on social networks, and above all as a citizen. For instance, a person who reads negative reports about the Chinese government or who has friends of friends that criticize the government will lose points on his or her citizen score. This negatively affects the jobs offered, raises the interest rate for loans, and makes it more difficult to travel outside China. This neo-feudal society has not yet fully reached democratic societies. However, the “credit scores” collected in the United States and elsewhere are to some extent similar, as they determine not only opportunities in the financial sector but go far beyond. The consequences for subjective well-being of these far-reaching digital developments are yet unknown. Many people are only partly or not at all aware of the restriction of their personal freedom and thus of their happiness. This influence may so far have been neglected and therefore be underestimated.

Literature

Helbing, Dirk. 2015. *Thinking Ahead. Essays on Big Data, Digital Revolution, and Participatory Market Society*. Cham: Springer.

Pasquale, Frank. 2016. *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

A positive relationship between an aggregate index of digitization and life satisfaction has been suggested by:

Katz, Raul L., and Pantelis Koutroumpis. 2013. Measuring Digitization: A Growth and Welfare Multiplier. *Technovation* 33 (10): 314–319.

Negative effects have been found by:

Sabatini, Fabio, and Francesco Sarracino. 2017. Online Networks and Subjective Well-Being. *Kyklos* 70 (3): 456–480.