Communication and "The Good Life"

Edited by Hua Wang

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Starting from the cover of this book, the authors have made an effort to emphasise the enormous power of change emerging from the vigorous mediated communication that is so iconic of this age. The cover is made by one of the authors, by touching heavy paper to the surface of a container of water and mixed inks, representing this phenomenon beautifully. The title *Communication and "The Good Life"* is driven from the theme of the 2014 International Communication Association Conference of the same name, convened in Seattle. The tripartite book focuses on 'Meaning, Happiness and Flourishing' in the first part; 'Perceptions, Connections and Protection' in the second; and 'Challenges, Opportunities and Transformation' in the third.

The concept of "The Good Life" has been thoroughly discussed in all areas throughout history, particularly in philosophy, where the focus was on how to achieve it and what prevents humans from doing so (Vorderer, 2015: xi). On the other hand, Communication, a relatively new discipline, has emerged carrying the notion of "Happiness" in its hands. Communication has drastically changed in the last few years, reflecting on the way we interact with one another with the help of new gadgets, which owning has been the main purpose of advertising that promises whomever owns them to be happy or simply enjoy a "better quality of life". However, the link between consumerism and happiness is not recent but the intensity and dimensions of this relationship which, of course, is all about using the Social and Digital Media, has differed in some dimensions, such as access to the enormous amount of information which is unconditional to the time and place and also the promise that we will never feel lonely or isolated no matter if we are physically remote. It is a "utopian" promise to achieve most of our needs through an innovative and unprecedented manner which has become only possible via the attainment of social media.

The significant change, made evident in the ways we communicate currently, due to the huge advancement of technologies, has created new challenges as well as opportunities. While celebrating these advancements, we need to reflect on how these changes affect our

individual well-being. There are two faces for using these technologies; it is a double edged sword, as while we enjoy the huge connectedness and instant information, we have in turn lost control of our time and mental presence with our families and closely related acquaintances. There is a call in the end of the introduction to the media and communication scholars to study the risks and dangers, not only the opportunities, especially as the risks are masqueraded by the promise of the "Good Life" that social media offers to individuals.

Part 1: Meaning, Happiness and Flourishing (chapters 1-5)

Chapter One: In Search of the Good Life

This chapter focuses on searching for the Good Life through exploration as a framework which helps analyse the design of new media practices. The authors conclude that our abilities to communicate, connect and network in the age of Exploration searching for the "Good Life" using our "personal devices, sensors and data feeds, which are the vessels that convey us to both new worlds and new experiences of old worlds" in an age where our mobile phones are our personal "compasses" that help us navigate in the sea of human experiences. Every day, there are always new additions to these gadgets; more applications are created, new methods, new dimensions giving us new experiences. Spiegel and Carlile (2016:7-16) consider these new tools our "vehicles of exploration". The authors suggest that the journey or the act of exploration itself might be the joy or the "Good Life" rather than the goal.

Chapter Two: The Good Life, Selfhood and Virtue Ethics in the Digital Age

This chapter argues that "The Good Life is the core of virtue ethics" (Ess 2015:17-29). It focuses on the re-emergence of virtue ethics recently within the domains of Information and Computing Ethics (ICE), and then within Media and Communication Studies (MCS). The author discusses his views about bridging between the two disciplines.

Chapter three: Eudaimonia, Mobile Communication and Social Flourishing

This chapter focuses on the Greek notion of *Eudaimonia*, which means flourishing or "the Good Life." The chapter investigates the role of mobile phones and whether it helps us to live

a better life (Ling 2015:31-44), looking from different angles at mobile phone adoption and its usage among different age groups, genders in different societies in countries such as Norway, Indonesia, Tanzania, Jamaica and China. The author discusses the effect of mobile phones on the structure of our daily lives and concludes that it is a double edged sword.

Chapter Four: Meanings and Entertainment, Fiction and Reality in the Land of Evolving Technologies

 (Oliver & Woolley 2015: 45-60) argue that new technologies have blurred the lines between entertainment and "real life" experiences. The authors are concerned that this blurring might undermine many aspects of our lives. They also discuss the importance of studying the concept of reality in media studies, especially research about meaningful media. New technologies might enhance our communication, connections and awareness of values that we share as human beings.

Chapter Five: Media Policy for Happiness, A Case Study of Bhutan

(Ang 2015: 61-78) discusses the notion of the Gross National Happiness (GNH), which has been applied in Bhutan as an ideal model that the rest of the world can apply. It is quite similar to the Declaration of Independence of the United States but it differs only in the way Bhutan has included it as a part of the National Constitution. It has also ensured that the media should act as a watchdog in order to improve democracy which could not be achieved without being totally independent of any business or governmental authority; merely Utopian application, in spite of depending on advertising but it is totally financially independent. The author discusses the application of this model from various perspectives, especially the challenges in applying and improving "GNH-friendly" media policies, which is food for thought.

Part 2: Perceptions, Connections, and Protection (chapter 6-10)

Chapter Six: Communication and Perceptions of the Quality of Life

(Jeffers, Neundorf and Atkin, 2015: 61-105) researches the Good Life from the perspective of people's assessment to their wider communities and the impact of their environment on them.

The authors studied the data sets of more than 30 years of various measures of communication related to QOL assessments and concluded the impact of the size of environment, sociodemographic categories, individual differences and people's views about QOL in their neighbourhoods which is a very interesting angle to look at, especially the role of traditional media in attaching people to their communities. The authors recommended revisiting this research perspective by applying the role of the interactive modern media platforms, but in this case it will not be their Geographic Communities anymore but their virtual ones that they chose from their like-minded friends in the growing intermass forums as Facebook.

Chapter Seven: Tuning in Versus Zoning out, The Role of Ego Depletion in Selective Exposure to Challenging Media

(Eden, Hartmann and Reinecke, 2015:107-125) suggested that media content can be differentiated according to the challenge that it presents. They applied an experimental study in order to test the role of the media content (cognitive or affective) in motivating its consumption. They discussed various dimensions such as self-control, cognitive and emotional processing of media content. They concluded that 'pleasure counteracts depletion' so that people who are ego-depleted are more attracted to the less intellectual media content. Future research is recommended to further investigate the relationship between selective exposure, self-control and their effect on consumers' psychological well-being, especially with the extensive availability of media entertainment.

Chapter Eight: The Secret to Happiness, Social Capital, Trait Self-Esteem and Subjective Well-Being

(Rui and Stefanone 2015: 127-141) applied a survey to investigate in their study the factors that affect the individual well-being looking from the lens of the personal evaluation to happiness based on the study of (Diener, Sapyta & Suh, 1998) which argued that 'subjective happiness is the key component to defining well-being and proposed subjective well-being'. The findings suggested that 'social capital facilitated subjective well-being'. The researchers recommended having a longitudinal study in the future in order to better investigate any changes related to individual access to 'Social capital, subjective well-being and trait self-esteem'. Also researchers recommended using other approaches other than the subjective in future research as social, or objective or psychological in order to investigate other types of well-being.

Chapter Nine: Modelling Communication in Research Network, Implications for the Good Networked Life

(Mok, Wellman and Dimitrova, 2015: 143-159) investigated the effect of the social network, internet and mobile revolutions on people who work together in a research arena, concluding that relationships improved and maximised producing a 'hyperconnected version of the Good Life' among researchers.

Chapter Ten: Communicating Online Safety, Protecting our Good Life on the Net

(Larose et al 2015: 161-177) have discovered the perfect marriage between Health Communication and online safety protection that can use the same theories based on (LaRose, Rifon & Enbody, 2008; Lee, LaRose & Rifon, 2008) who focused on the Protection Motivation Theory (PMT, Rogers, 1975; Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1997). They compared the behaviour of protecting the individual's health to the online protection behaviours as it is considered a threat to the well-being of individuals, they suggested that 'online threats spread through contact with others as disease does'. This innovative approach aims to relate the PMT theory to Online Safety behaviour which is an innovative approach worth further investigation theoretically and empirically, the researchers encourage policy-makers and future researchers to adopt this approach.

Part Three: Challenges, Opportunities, and Transformation (chapter 11-14)

Chapter Eleven: Communicative Figurations of the Good Life, Ambivalences of the Mediatization of Homelessness and Transnational Migrant Families

(Hepp, Lunt and Hartmann, 2015:181-196) chose two categories: homeless people and migrants, to better present the mediatisation process. Because of the difficult circumstances they experience, their need to access the media is important, as it will improve their lives. The authors argue that in spite of the opportunities given through mediatisation, it might be an obstacle in itself, as without having access to these media, people's needs cannot be achieved. They suggested the role of media for the "Good Life" particularly through the Communicative Figurations perspective.

Chapter Twelve: Reimagining the Good Life with Disability, Communication, New Technology, and Humane Connections

(Alper, Ellcessor, Ellis and Goggin, 2015:197-211) discussed that "the Good Life" is imagined far from illness, disability and impairment. Unfortunately new media and modern communication have contributed to forming the image of disability as a barrier or a tragedy that can be dealt with and improved when modern technology used. The authors in this chapter focused on the dynamics, tensions and texture of communication in the daily lives of people living with various disabilities. Giving a good example of Stephen Hawking, they focused on using a speech-generating communication i.e. augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) which in spite of the digital revolution, these gadgets are still a neglected area in theories of technology. They also discussed other undermined areas in media as closed captioning and video description. They also linked between disability studies and Science and technology studies (STS). The authors concluded that a critical examination of disability is about communication in the first place.

Chapter Thirteen: The 20th Anniversary of the Digital Divide, Challenges and Opportunities for Communication and the Good Life

(Kretchmer, Pierce and Robinson, 2015: 213-132) The author argue in this chapter about the meaning of "the Good Life" and that it is not the happy medium or destination that people arrive and stay at but it is about having the tools and circumstances that will allow them to reach this good life. They call for catering for the diversity i.e. cultural, linguistic and social needs of the marginalised groups. Also, they stressed the importance of students accessing the digital resources and supplying them with the tools and appropriate conditions in order to achieve equity that will help them to reach "the Good Life". This will not be achieved except by mapping the knowledge gaps and facing the challenge of the digital divide.

Chapter Fourteen: Liberating structures, Engaging Everyone to Build a Good Life Together

(Lipmanowiccz, Singhal, Mccandless and Wang, 2015:233-258) display various ways of liberation structures (which dates back to the Greek philosopher Socrates more than two thousand years ago) in the work place and also transforming classrooms and learning experience aiming to better achieve great goals in big projects which does not request any outstanding levels of leadership or qualifications.

Media scholars have presented a very rich piece of work, they discussed their views about "the Good Life" from various perspectives and argued if the new technologies and various social media platforms have shifted our lives towards or away from "the Good Life". They discussed the big change that occurred to the structures of our daily life and the change in behaviour with its impact on our social life. Some dimensions have been neglected as the impact on the new technologies and communication patterns in the work place and working styles. Also all the authors have dealt differently with the notion of "the Good Life" according to their framework. Demographics were not one of the dimensions in any of the chapters, although I would expect that "the Good Life" from the perspective of youth is totally different from than that of adults. A behavioural approach was needed to wrap all the various perspectives of "the Good Life" discussed in this book which might be a call for future research.

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