

Gross National Happiness: A Label for Quality Information

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Abstract

The experience of happiness depends on both the individual management of the human mind and the external conditions that influence our lives. Capacity building for management of the human mind through educational mind training schemes should be accompanied by the introduction of a quality (GNH-)label on commercial information, publicity and advertisement, diminishing the creation of false needs. This label would guarantee both the need for the promoted product and the quality of the non-misleading message in the information. Through the introduction of a GNH label based on existing ethical codes and the principles of a sustainable economy, the existing ideology of the systematic creation of artificial needs, a multiple source of unhappiness, can be brought to an end.

Introduction

The previous GNH conference in Bangkok finished with a question and comment round.

Some of the proposals and thoughts expressed brought me to the idea that the experience of happiness depends on both the individual management of the human mind and the external conditions that influence our lives.

I engaged in non-exhaustive exploratory research of the why and wherefrom of an historic derailment that led humankind to the present state of unbalanced welfare, life threatening usage of the limited resources of the earth, and growing discomfort and

unhappiness in the lives of millions of people. How did it get to this stage and how can we possibly redirect evolution on to the right track?

Three examples

I would like to start this exploratory paper with three true stories. They will be followed by a historical bird flight of the relation between human needs and a specific tool used by society to influence their fulfilment. Finally I will present a proposal for the creation of a practical tool to evaluate the quality of information that invades daily the lives of millions of people.

My first story comes from Australia where I am currently living. Tim, the son of my Australian friend Michael, is an excellent student, aged eleven, and as so many kids addicted to computer games, tends to eat nothing but junk food.

Scientific research has shown that hidden seducers have been introduced into computer play games for children and youngsters by junk food multinationals. These entice players to consume junk food.

Tim belongs to the 25% of Australians suffering from obesity. Health research has indicated that for the first time in human history the younger generation may not have the life expectancy of its parents (Hellmich, 2005).

Obesity is threatening the future societies of the US and Australia in the near and long term. This problem is just starting in Europe. The human and economic cost in the long term is immense.

The second story I would like to tell happened to a good friend of mine in Belgium. Her daughter Anne, 14 years old, is suffering from anorexia nervosa.

Anne, who is genuinely interested in the arts and driven by a deep wish to become a fashion designer, is indoctrinated by the idea of

an ideal female body; a concept brought to her by the available publicity channels of fashion design, women's magazines and clothing advertisements, presenting female bodies in a state of physical starvation as ideal attractive models. It is statistically proven that this is linked with the increase of anorexia nervosa cases in young girls and the psychotic obsession with being overweight amongst women (Uechi, J. (2008).

I was confronted with the third story when living in India.

Gita lives with her four children and husband in a small village in India. The villagers are very poor and depend on the erratic harvest of crops from small fields. When the monsoon fails to occur, many small farmers in the region commit suicide.

Gita's village has not one latrine. Hygiene is below all standards and illnesses reign proportionally in accordance. Some of the reasons for women to hide are the possibility of sexual exposure which can lead to loss of dignity and becoming unmarriageable. This is an overall stress factor.

At the same time, in Gita's village many villagers have a TV; at every crossroad is a small shop selling Nescafé, Coca Cola and other brands produced by multinational food companies. Every second year Gita's husband buys a new mobile phone on credit. Publicity for providers, mobile suppliers and special credit schemes at extraordinary interest rates is presented via 30 TV channels and advertising billboards scattered in the small fields. Farmers commonly rent out their fields to allow the placement of big billboards, as this represents a welcome source of income needed to survive (NewInternationalist, 2008).

These stories clearly indicate that something is wrong. The knowledge that the lifestyle of people is intentionally influenced by externally provided incentives is not new, but it is time to take a closer look at it and to deal with it.

A step back in history

I'd like to take us on a walk back into history to have a look at the relationship between human needs and the experience of happiness.

A subjective feeling

Happiness is a concept that we have been taught to conceive as being the equivalent of material welfare.

But is it all that simple?

The experience of well-being is linked to as well as mental as physical fulfilment of needs.

The experience of a need that is not a basic survival need (let us call it for a moment a subjective feeling) is part of the realm of the mind.

Via the channels of the human senses the human mind is constantly bombarded by internal and external incentives. These incentives can be regulated by the mind.

Buddhist meditation practise proves that the experience of desire, need or craving can be managed in the long term.

Scientific research via MRI of the mind in meditation of long term Buddhist practitioners resulted in the observation of an astonishing capacity of the human mind to transform destructive incentives into a peaceful and joyful state of equanimity.

As a result, experts in Buddhist mind science have been working with neuroscientists to design research that will document the neural impact of these varieties of mental training. ... This research has yielded stunning results, which if replicated will alter forever certain basic scientific assumptions – for example, that systematic training in meditation, when sustained steadily over years, can enhance the human capacity for positive changes in brain activity to an extent

undreamed of in modern cognitive neuroscience.... (Mingyur & Swanston, 2007).

It is my belief that the Buddhist emphasis on training the mind by managing thoughts, emotions, and concepts deserves collective endorsement and support from society. This could involve educational schemes which would include specialised mind training meditation methods to increase skills in mind management.

It would provide the individual with an effective tool to increase personal well-being.

A material need

It is essential to provide the individual with the mental tools to increase personal well-being, but also society is involved in the fulfilment of needs.

Let us come back for a moment to the fulfilment of basic survival needs and the technical solution that humankind invented for this.

The fulfilment of basic survival needs was eased by the invention of a symbolic icon of value (money) that made the exchange of the material satisfaction of needs possible. First the exchange of goods led to barter. The mechanism facilitating exchanges for the fulfilment of needs based on money led to trade capitalism, industrial capitalism, imperialism, financial capitalism and the globalised capitalist economic world system that we live today.

This human collective economic organisation to fulfil the basic material needs proved in need of regulation. Humankind created a system that provides only part of the world population with enormous material welfare, while for others basic needs are still not satisfied.

The system itself started to lead a life of its own to the extent that it became an end instead of a means. Out of fear that the functioning

of the mechanism would slow down, the system, including its featuring parts and mechanisms of action, is worshipped as a god who may not be questioned but on the contrary whose wishes and requirements all have to be satisfied.

The name of this god is “economic growth”.

A breathtaking fear of an eventual standstill of the global economy made those responsible blind to the limits of a competitive growth economical system.

To avoid a slowdown and eventual standstill of the growth economy, *the creation of artificial needs* was invented and started, as a servant of economic growth, to lead a life of its own, with in its wake the following paradigm: the more symbols of value I possess, the more my needs are satisfied and as a consequence the happier I am. Or: the more symbols of value I possess (money or property), the happier I am.

The uncontrolled publicity and advertisements promoting products that are cynically generalised as “goods” operates as an effective tool to create these artificial needs.

The invention and *image*-ination of artificial needs

Originally, products were advertised through a simple announcement of where goods were available.

Later, following the expansion of trade capitalism, production and competition increased.

The take-off of the industrial revolution in the 19th century was accompanied by acceleration in the technical revolution of the arts and the reproduction of images.

In the 20th century, a second acceleration caused by the automation of production and mass supply was accompanied by

the development of mass reproductive design and printing techniques (Benjamin, 1936).

Studies and research in western art history have detected that contemporary ways of seeing (and as a consequence the experience of reality) incorporated in contemporary publicity and advertisement find their origins in the historic tradition of oil painting later transmitted via graphic and photographic techniques (Berger, 1972).

This tradition of ways of seeing (including the image-ination of the ideal female body) continued in the third acceleration of the information age and its infinite possibilities of publicity in search engines of the worldwide web, in online play and video games, in pop-ups and text messages.

The infinite increase in production and competition has led to an ideology of how to create and promote artificial needs (Ries, Al & Laura, 2004), through advertising new products, often totally unnecessary or even harmful.

Beyond the fulfillment of basic survival needs, both the material life conditions and the human mind are subject to a comfort zone that is open for the endless creation of surplus and artificial needs. It is this zone that is discovered and skillfully played on by the ideology of the promotion of false needs.

Advertising has invaded all channels of information and communication.

It is entrenched in all existing media. Publicity is, to paraphrase Buddhist language, "the Big Vehicle" of economic growth. Publicity is the fuel to the growth economy and the cause of consumerism.

As a consequence of narrowly focused economic organization and of a continuing specific tradition of ways of seeing that is

incorporated in publicity, populations worldwide are flooded with one-sided views on wealth, welfare and happiness.

The derailment

Due to a lack of regulation, the balance between needs and sufficient supply is derailed.

The aberrant consequences of this derailment are multiple in size, sort and variety. They appear in all kind of societies, different cultures, rich and poor. They have in common that any controls over the instruments for the creation of false needs are lacking.

In the *richer parts* of the world people' s minds are continuously stressed by the confrontation with new so-called indispensable products.

Due to publicity, people consume for the sake of consuming, caused by production for the sake of production, permanently and indestructible polluting the earth.

The mental fixation on the endless collection of more property or money, permanently polluting in its turn the human mind often leads to extreme depression and unhappiness.

In the *poor countries* of the world, the promotion of unnecessary goods hinders or replaces the fulfilment of basic survival needs.

To keep it simple: televisions and coca cola are available in regions where people die of starvation.

How to remedy the derailment?

Capacity building for management of the human mind to judge and resist false needs via the introduction of specific methods of mind training in education programs is but one remedial instrument for the derailment.

The creation of a quality label

This analysis of the economy and publicity in relation to the experience of needs and a related feeling of happiness or unhappiness brought me to the idea of another instrument to remedy the problem: *the introduction of a quality label on information* (I call it easily the GNH-label), with a focus on commercial information, publicity and advertisement.

This label should guarantee both the need for the promoted product and the quality of the non-misleading message in the information.

The visibility of the GNH-label will inform consumers about the indisputable need for a product and the quality of the message.

The application of a GNH-label on information aims to restore the balance between needs and specific types of supply on a national and local basis, taking into account the human and eco-maintenance needs of the human population and the earth.

The development of a protocol

The creation of a GNH-label guaranteeing quality information, applicable in the sector of advertisement and publicity, should be based on *the development of a protocol* that defines the criteria for application of the label.

Focusing on the sector of commercial publicity in the first place, the protocol for the development of a label has to take into account at least the following elements:

- For the GNH-label to be recognized as the premier award for quality information which is a genuinely better choice for human well-being, fulfilment of basic survival needs, mental welfare capacity building, and the environment.

- To help information and services providers, manufacturers, retailers, to get recognition for good standards, and purchasers to make reliable choices.

Criteria for the GNH label

This label could be based on a set of criteria as defined and controlled by competent international, national, regional and local authorities.

To define these criteria existing ethical codes such as those protecting human rights, international antiracism, antislavery, or legislation such as labour standards etc. can be used as corner stones.

Existing quality labels such as the Eco-label and criteria for well-being as GNH Indicators or NEF's Happy Planet Index or National Accounts of Well-being (www.neweconomics.org/gen) could become defining components of the protocol.

Key aims

- *To achieve significant human well-being improvements* developing, publishing and promoting criteria that push the production and publicity market forward, in order to minimise the mental and material polluting impacts of a wide range of information products and services over their whole life-cycle;
- *To ensure the credibility of the award* - by efficient administration and through *criteria* which:
 - o are ethically strong;
 - o are based on good science, including the
 - o precautionary principle of the real need of the product;
 - o take account of consumer mental and material
 - o health;

- require good product performance;
 - are developed transparently and cost-effectively;
 - are reasonably attainable;
 - are environmentally strong;
 - are up to date.
- *To encourage information and services providers, manufacturers, retailers to apply for the award, to publicize their own participation in the scheme, and to promote the availability of GNH-labelled products and information about them;*
 - *To encourage purchasers to buy products and services with the award;*
 - *To improve consumer awareness and behaviour regarding the ethical optimal use of information products and services in accordance with human well-being criteria.*

The introduction of the label

The creation and application of a GNH-label on quality information on a broad scale can only succeed if it is introduced at all competent governmental and legal levels.

A strategy to reach the policy levels should take into account at least:

- existing schemes that are part of a global concern... (see ecolabel, fair trade, paradiso...) (www.eco-label.com; www.fairtrade.net; www.paradiso-fp7.eu)
- existing bodies, governmental and non-governmental, on multinational, national, regional and local levels;
- awareness campaigns for competent authorities, organisations and the public;
- the joining of existing programs with the same vision that are already active in the field and that have the resources to support financially the project of a GNH label.

The joining of existing structures, such as the EU's Integrated Product Policy, could facilitate and prevent the re-invention of implementation structures and prevent double spending of costs, labour and material.

Other governments with an existing framework or with sensitivity to a similar awareness policy should be approached.

It is obvious that our Bhutanese host is the best example.

A successful introduction of a quality label on commercial information would profit from an essentially positive approach.

The usage of a quality award, materialised in a label, could be uplifted with government information campaigns concerning for example guidelines in health conduct, educational items, environmental awareness, sustainability courses, sufficient supply, etc., carrying the label.

Basic but repetitive government information, labelled with the GNH quality award, about first line services for citizens via specialized publicity or advertisement channels could create in the long term a competitive incentive for the commercial sector to obtain the label as an award for the dispatching of quality information concerning services and products.

A proposal and a thought

The application of a quality label on publicity and advertisement might seem at a first sight a huge and complex project.

But could it not be appropriate to act now? Now that we have, due to an ongoing financial and economic global crisis, a high awareness of the need to review and regulate a major part of the global economy?

People ask for labels. People seek assurance that their lives are not threatened by food and consumer products.

Why not start to use the strong tools available as a side effect of a sane instrument such as a regulated sustainable economy?

Why not start to use the enormous effectiveness of publicity to inform the public of real needs in accordance with their environmental conditions?

Why not use a controlled advertisement system to educate populations about healthy priorities for the development of the society, community, family and the individual?

In other words: would it not be a great result if a latrine became the real status symbol in the village of Gita?

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