



## **Wellbeing and the Future A UCL GCHW and Foresight Analysts Network Workshop**

**5 July 2012**

**Convened by Peter Antonioni (UCL Management Science) and  
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### **Post-workshop report from Peter Antonioni**

*To begin with, I'd like to personally thank everyone who came, listened, engaged, talked and made the event what it was. The overall feeling is of something very positive happening, and I believe I speak for my colleagues in saying thank you to all attendees and participants.*

To begin with we presented a brief presentation and provocation. Our outlook was that the quest for well-being has ancient roots, informs much of our present structures and is important in setting a backdrop for the range of possible outcomes for our societies in the future. We also felt it was too important to be merely left as handed down wisdom, and recommended that we conceptualise well-being as something we might find, but affected by forces around us. There were six breakout groups, and we asked questions of them to guide a discussion through six areas. Four looked at the forces acting upon us, by way of casting them as relationships:

- With technology and via innovations
- with each-other (the societal context)
- With institutions (the political context)
- With production and consumption and through work (economic context).

Obviously, these areas overlap; after all, technology has social uses (and always has had to some extent, especially when we take the broader view of technology), and a workplace is very likely to tick all four boxes, being a space affected by technology, characterised by social, (micro) political and economic relationships.

The other two groups took a slightly different tack, related to our questions about whether there was some potential for casting well-being in a strategic management context. One looked at information and the other began with a future's wheel approach to finding context in what might change as a result of our taking well-being more seriously.

The impressions taken from the groups naturally ranged outside each of the topic areas and into overlapping areas. It is very difficult for instance to discuss our relationships with each other without thinking about how technology mediates those relationships, how economics affects them or how political structures make them easier or harder to maintain.

In the next section, we'll put together the combined feedbacks to form a more complete picture. We'll stick approximately with the six categories that we used, although we'll note cross linkages as required.

### **Session Group 1: The futures wheel.**

Here, we asked the question "suppose we really did move towards an agenda based, however generally, on well-being. What do you think or feel would be the changes to other factors engendered by this approach"

This group used a number of 'headline' subcategories for their insights, which we follow:

#### **1. Institutions**

Interestingly, and in contrast to the 'data driven' views that tend to characterise the question of managing well-being, the group had some key points to make that were a little more challenging, in particular believing that the change to a well-being agenda would require institutions to be

- a) more empathetic, or more guided by a sense of empathy.
- b) placing less emphasis on economic factors
- c) doing less rationalising and more listening
- d) placing more value on all roles.
- e) being social enterprises rather than anti-social

#### **2. Safety Net**

An interpretation of how the safety net might operate in our society is a key point. Currently, Britain's welfare system is not generous by international standards (in fact having the lowest replacement level for unemployment benefit in the OECD at an average 17% of salary: the next lowest at 27% is the USA). There are also an inferno's worth of devils in the details amongst the hidden incentives and transfers that occur within most welfare systems, and therefore are difficult to evaluate across countries.

Concerning the safety net, four key principles emerged from the discussion:

- a) That it be possible to participate in society without money,
- b) That dignity be retained
- c) That insecurities be removed
- d) That people are not taught to be scared.

#### **3. Aspiration**

"Aspirational" was perhaps one of the watchwords of policy during the decade proceeding the current recession. It would be fair to say, however, that aspiration was often reduced to an economic value: one could aspire to have one's own home, or to have better designed kitchen, but aspiration towards, for instance, education or higher skills or even proficiency at a non-economic activity were less discussed.

The group's elicited views bore out a wider casting of the aspirational term seeing it

in terms of

- a) Less elitism
- b) More value of more jobs
- c) Having a role in society,
  - *within which* the idea of converting passengers into role players and the role of neighbourhoods were raised.

#### **4. In the workplace, politics and in general**

The group used the term 'shared values' in many places, seeing this as a concept linked to CSR.

#### **5.The Media**

In this section the group focussed on some qualities that might be expected of the media, whose role in the promotion or not of well-being is perhaps a little under-researched.

- c) On one specific point, the group noted 'no advertising to children'
- d) Otherwise the media should not focus on envy
- e) Be less drama seeking
- f) Have more awareness of well-being
- g) Less news and more focus on well-being.

#### **6. Overall**

A very thought provoking codicil added to the report of the panel asked some very hard questions of whether, in fact, we still wished to be in hunter gatherer scaled communities, and whether work had moved away from humans, and whether there should be future discussion of the re-allocation of work.

#### **7.Our comments**

The changes wrought by adopting a well-being approach have every chance of being highly transformative. There is, however a great chasm that has to be crossed. Taking, for example, the view of more empathetic institutions, it is a very long journey that must be undertaken for institutions to be able to take that kind of approach. Even were we able to advance a definition of 'institutional empathy', which at this stage I don't believe we are, the transformation from the indifference that characterises most reported interactions between an individual and an institution is a process involving many changes in attitude and reconfiguring of many systems within the institution. This is not to say it cannot happen, but that it is in its conceptual infancy and will take a long time to occur. During this change there are several clear risks, for instance that grafting on the focus on well-being to data driven management could result in worse outcomes as entirely inappropriate targets are chased. Even during a definite move towards well-being as empathy, the short term could be very bumpy as people's responsibilities shift and they take on new imperatives, which might be challenging also for those managing the transformation.

We note two particularly strong cross linkages here, that also inform our general

discussion. The questions of how we structure our economy and who does what within a working sphere are especially relevant now, as we re-examine our values in the wake of the crash. Within these questions, the issue of why it is that an increasing percentage of rewards go to the top, both within institutions and societally, has emerged. The question of how this type of arrangement creates stresses upon the individual is currently being studied, with the aim of exploring the transmission mechanisms from a type of society to the individual. On the question of work, it is very likely that the future will see increased deployment of mechanisation. Currently, when the price of labour is a key variable, the relevant decision is often to outsource to a cheaper country. It is likely in the future that these losses, particularly of what we might describe as low skill jobs will be to machines, and dealing with the 'lumpy' distribution of working hours will be one of the key challenges for our economic system. We might eventually, as Brian Aldiss suggested end up with a system that incorporates quasi-unionised representation of the underworked in 'Workless' parties.

## **Session Group 2: Information and indicators.**

We considered, in our presentation that the normal way a complex model is reduced to policymaking information is via an index of some kind, weighting the information by some measure of importance and then managing to the index. There are obvious limitations, perhaps analogous to those Hayek saw in economic planning, in the degree of foresight that can be exercised using these type of indicators (not least because of data lags, incompleteness or plain inappropriateness of data).

The group looking at information and indicators took this issue as a starting point and issued several challenges:

1. A requirement for better data on mental health. Our comment, this is a recognised deficiency at the moment.
2. Are we really capturing well-being or happiness? Are we accounting for the qualitative emotional data that people are adept at eliciting from others but scaled arrangements of people (companies, institutions other organisations) are not?
3. More seriously still, we are posed the question of how these can be applied across populations to enable international comparison or between people whose preferences are likely to be different, or whose reactions emotionally might be different.
4. The link between sustainability and well-being was raised. Our comment, on the basis of research this is actually a very tough question to answer. On the one hand, increased well-being across indices *for a society* (not necessarily for an individual) are associated with economic growth, and falls in economic growth are correlated not just with lower individual happiness but with social unrest factors. On the other, people may respond to negative economic growth (i.e. economic depression) by maximising other, non economic, goals, and therefore derive more happiness. There is no overall consensus at the moment on this issue.
5. How do we account for individual choice within this framework? PA comment: I believe this to be a most salient point. I would advance that our treatment of

individual choice and indeed our treatment of personhood, or agency, is fluid. Current discourse has a significant element of reaction to, or denial of, a specific individualism, naturally in view of the apparent failure of the market system, at least in the eyes of many. Yet it is moot as to whether a 'happy' society can occur only when people are guided, legislated or otherwise pushed into or away from exercising their own choice. I would ideally like to return to this issue, as it is a current fault-line as well as a future one.

6. Finally, a creative solution, and one that comes from the more eudaemonic school of looking at well-being was looking at 'cultural goods' and cultural product from a well-being perspective.

### **Session Group 3: The Well-being Economy**

We tasked this breakout group with looking at well-being through our relationships with the means of production and consumption, or what we thought of as the economic aspects of well-being. Again, as we had hoped, the brief was interpreted widely. We got several very key insights from the group:

1. The value of sharing was identified very quickly as a key component, through new and participatory media, and in new business models (open sourcing/ crowd-sourcing/).
2. The value of the commons was also discussed under sharing. The commons is in itself a hard problem for economics. However, one way out of looking at the commons is as something privately owned but shared amongst members or users of that resource, as in Lin Ostrom's work on the commons.
3. The question of whether we work too hard or to too little effect was also raised. The point about diminishing returns to our work is very well taken (and I'd add here, as in the final feedback, that a second problem is the 'lumpy' distribution of working hours that sees some working all hours, and others being available but unable to find any hours of work).
4. This is of further importance as the group saw the distributional aspects of the economy taking precedence over the growth aspects. After a certain level of GDP is reached, distribution tends to have the bigger effect on well-being.

Two oblique points that need mentioning before moving on: Firstly the extent to which well-being might be 'maximised in obliquity'; that is to say that we do a lot better when we follow something else which in turn helps to maximise our well-being. The examples given were of embedded design principles. The second oblique point is that there is a concern regarding risk overload, that given too much information on risks, it has become less possible for anyone to draw a rational conclusion or form a basis for action. Both of these emerged from within the conversation on the economy, and I think are evident examples of how multi-factored and multi-dimensional any full analysis might have to be.

### **Session Group 4: The Well-being Society**

We cast this as being about how individuals relate to each other. However, again, we gave full license to roam over the territory. Again to summarise:

1. The force immediately identified was the aging of our societies (from a demographic point of view), a known trend (although one that is not set in stone). Managing the demographic transition is likely to be one of our key challenges, not just in the UK but throughout the world as birth rates have fallen in developing countries too.
2. The social environment is also conditioned by expectations, for instance of or from family.
3. Development creates a mix of factors, for instance obesity is often characterised as a first world problem brought about by industrialisation of the food manufacturing process.
4. The value of community was raised, and what happens when the social capital as described by Putnam is absent, particularly in cities. This brought the further raising of how our modes of work do or don't affect social capital, with a point being made that we have a lack of truly 'co-operative' work.
5. Group consciousness was next. As pointed out, people can cope with relatively few friends or contacts: Dunbar's number (the maximum number of stable social relationships) is approximately 150 (on the scale of the size of our earliest communities).
6. A question was raised on whether research had been conducted on whether people feel part of a community. There is some, but it would I think be useful to look at this in a more prospective way and look at what factors might lead a person to feel or not to feel part of a community.
7. The group also counseled that simply valuing community on nostalgia might be a dead end.
8. Finally, the group thought it might be interesting to explore religion as a counterweight to the market system, in the sense that the root of religions may come together at some deep level. This, I would more normally characterise as spirituality, but the question of the extent to which it can act as a counterweight to societal or market pressure and under what circumstances this experience might be positive does remain under-explored. (I interject here that Barro's research actually suggests that preponderance of believers can, under certain circumstances boost GDP).

## **Session Group 5: The Well-being Polity**

We framed our questions in terms of relationships to institutions, and asked whether democracy was a necessary condition of well-being. Deliberately we left our terms fairly generally defined so that we might elicit responses from beyond a narrow range. We weren't disappointed.

1. Many points were briefly raised concerning the value drivers around the well-being of stakeholders, in particular that autonomy and choice are powerful drivers of employee retention.

2. There was no single ideal for the concept of what a well-being institution might be. Autonomy and choice were again pointed out as key concepts. The well-being institution, it was posited, would give priority for the individual, and be driven by values, although this in itself is a concept that needs identification as there are a range of values that might be drivers. John Lewis was given as an example of a values led organisation.
3. In looking at how the institutions might behave, there was a key dilemma between the core of the institution and the interface, the part the public sees. Often the two do not match or reflect each other.
4. Whether democracy was useful or essential provoked some interesting points. Caution was advised as we were overwhelmingly not a representative panel, and it was pointed out that though we might value choice and autonomy, not everyone does.
5. An outside point, but one of immediate relevance is the raising of the 'nanny state' narrative, which rather leads to the question of whether there is a truthful narrative or an agenda at play or whether communication leads to a perception of the nanny state existing. I interject here that this is actually a very complex question, not just philosophically. To say that, for instance, this is a question of bureaucracy leaves open the question of which bureaucracies are leading (central government/ other agencies/ or even the bureaucracies that form as private companies reach a certain scale of operation.) The degree to which people *feel* pressed upon might be as important as the actual actions taken, and this needs to be researched.

## **Session Group 6: Technology**

Some of the greatest challenges for well-being come from integrating a new technology into our existences. All technologies from the wheel onwards make differences to our lives and therefore our well-being in some way, especially when they are considered as interacting with prior technologies and therefore the skill-sets we might have acquired at some cost. The disruptions wrought by technologies can be long lasting, yet their benefits equally long lasting.

## **Social and sharing**

1. One of the first major points of discussion for the group was how technology could improve people's wellbeing through the dissipation of knowledge through sharing and social interaction. One example that was mentioned was 'Horses Mouth' ([www.horsesmouth.co.uk](http://www.horsesmouth.co.uk)) which acts as an online mentoring site.
2. Social networking was also heavily debated and how it could act as a 'lubricator for discussion'. Also, the benefits of how social networks allow for communication that was not possible within the physical world. However, there was agreement that perhaps the physical relationship cannot be replaced as people distinguished between conversation between people and the intermediary tool that they were using (a social network for example).
3. Conversely, some raised the argument that perhaps these services were 'cruel masters', and that they constantly demand our attention, perhaps at the expense of

real human contact. Additionally, it was also felt that technology could mean 'bringing one's work home' and therefore increasing work related stress

4. The underlying individual and their capacity to connect was also mentioned as a possible variable in determining whether these services were beneficial to people's wellbeing.
5. Can bring people whom would otherwise be socially excluded into contact with others through social networks, forums and communities with shared interests.
6. Can make what should be private moments public on social networks due lack of understanding and naivety. Moreover, people may feel they have a lack of control of their information as others share it. However, they may feel there is compromise as others information is shared too.
7. Poor awareness of implications of actions for social benefit gained in the short term. However, with the increasing visibility information people shouldn't hold a '2D' impression of people.
8. Creativity through anxiety and therefore perhaps it isn't a bad thing.
9. Having the capacity to connect digitally has affirmed our appetite for the value we place on real world connection, e.g. science parks. But will this continue as globalisation advances? E.g. a telephone becoming a high value connection, despite being tech driven.
10. Participation and positive engagement are vital to wellbeing at all life stages. (REF. "Cocaine Nights. JG Ballard)

### **Political Activism & Barriers**

1. Barriers to access were considered as a potential issue in relation to the question over whether everyone would benefit or not. Ultimately attempting to answer who benefits and who is deprived.
2. Technology could be limited not just by price, but also through accessibility and design (simplicity versus complexity)
3. In actual fact, technology could serve as a force for relief and improve people's quality of life as it has allowed people to work from home, which without technology they were unlikely to people to do
4. Source of freedom – breaking a barrier to have voice heard. The example raised was the Arab Spring.
5. Acts as a tool for political activism – Occupy, and London Riots serving as examples, in addition to the Arab Spring.
6. Price and accessibility could put it beyond the reach of many at the moment
7. Infrastructure, such as access to broadband is a current issue, but as development continues this shouldn't be a long-term issue.



8. Helps provide access to knowledge and information in the remotest places, with little infrastructure.
9. Is political/social change capable of keeping up with the speed of technology + associated expectations? E.G. The Arab Spring. Technological tools cannot guarantee desired outcome.

## **Security**

1. Is security compatible with wellbeing? E.g. communications surveillance in the name of national security, and is government over reaching and using it as an excuse?
2. 'Anxiety is good for you' – too much security is bad for wellbeing.
3. People's privacy being secured vital to their positive experiences online.
4. Responsibility of providers to provide strong and transparent security measures.
5. What is the wellbeing impact of the invasion of privacy that social networking encourages?
6. However, this already exists in the form of television and media intrusion in personal lives – not just for prurience but E.g. Crime solving (Individual vs. national wellbeing)
7. No longer possible to recreate yourself somewhere else due to networked computers – inescapable avoid trail. (Not just social media)
8. What is the impact of personal brand management/self-censorship in online communication to wellbeing?
9. Impact of 'tailored experience' versus privacy.

## **Education**

1. Technology makes it possible for people and the world to access education / lectures and improves their opportunities. But what about the human interactive element? (Resources, Testing, Tracking).
2. Increasing number of digital education tools (EdX, iTunes U) improving accessibility to education materials providing a wider opportunity for people to improve themselves.
3. 'One laptop per child initiative' – whole family exposed to tech by osmosis. (Mobile connectivity supersedes anticipated direction of travel).
4. Possible combination of social networking and sharing tools with education tools can help to improve the absent interaction of students and teachers.
5. Fully capable mobile devices improving access to education tools (Access to e-books and applications) and improving engagement.

6. Technology tools helping people to overcome their inherent weaknesses.
7. Digital education tools and communication tools make possible 'Global learning' and improved feedback and testing.
8. Lack of social interaction may limit people's ability to improve their understanding.
9. Online learning tools means lectures and course materials can be made available online meaning more time can be spent on seminars and discussion – helping to improve engagement, people's understanding and social interaction.

## **Conclusion**

After the feedback section we returned with two points. The first, from Dr Maxwell was on the legacy of the 1960s and in particular the curious case of our diminished appetites for experimentation, and what we might call play (whose name obscures its importance in our process of learning about the world). The second, from me, was that a future challenge for the developed world (sooner, than the rest of the world rather than in place of) would be the growth of mechanisation which is finally poised to deliver on its promises and make a substantial proportion of the economy permanently workless. Of course, it also affords the opportunity to use time to create things of greater personal or societal value, but these gains are unlikely to be realised as long as worklessness is managed in the way that we do.

Overall there are many questions to ask about how we might manage a well-being society or economy or polity. The web of questions in itself is complex and susceptible only to understanding through many different approaches. In that spirit, we would like to conclude by thanking all those who attended, participated and gave us a wonderfully rich and diverse set of factors to explore.

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**August 2012**