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### Media manipulation and happiness

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## *Media Manipulation and Happiness*

James P. Mahon

American author, Ralph Waldo Emerson (25 May 1803-27 April 1882), said, “For every minute you are angry, you lose sixty seconds of happiness,” (Picardi 2015). Take a moment before you read further and think how many times you have been angry in the last few weeks. Now, add up how many minutes approximately of your life that was. For some it may have been five minutes angry at traffic congestion, for others, days angry at a friend or family member or even a minute angry with yourself after forgetting your keys and having to run back.

Our lives are filled with absences of happiness as well as joy. Voids where happiness could have come in, yet we shut it out. One of the influences on shutting out this happiness is through comparison. We compare our own situations to that of those around us and those we wish to emulate. Daniel Horowitz, in his 2011 book *Happier?: The History of a Cultural Movement that Aspired to Transform America*, writes:

“The problem was that, in the good old days, the beggar had little exposure to the lives of millionaires; in contrast to the early twenty-first century, celebrity culture, reality television and social media (has) exposed everyday Americans to people who seemed more attractive, affluent and happy than themselves,” (152).

We now live in a time when our phones bombard us with social media, online, digital and broadcast content filled with celebrity lives. Perfectionism is presented as the norm and something to aspire to.

A colleague in higher education once told me that he went to visit a Scottish high school for a research project. When asking the teenagers what they wanted to be when they grew up, one girl replied, “I want to be a WAG.” When he queried why, she replied, “So I can be famous and do nothing. If that doesn’t work, I’ll make a sex tape.” This statement, in essence, sums up one concerning example in the dynamic cultural shift where we seek happiness for ourselves as a Millennial generation.

Having spent more than 10 years working in TV and radio, I have learned to present a life that I do not actually live to the audience. From my early days with TG4 and reality TV shows such as, *Eochair an Ghra*, to being a contestant on *Big Brother* and *X Factor*, the world of semi-scripted and controlled TV was one I became more accustomed to, but didn’t always agree with. This world of artificial “reality” (presented to millions on a daily basis) is a filtered one, as are the people in it. Producers, researchers, editors, and psychologists plan who will be in each programme, what their trigger points are, as well as present opportunities for them to clash and/or excel.

Over the last decade we have moved from traditional media that is beyond our own control and significant influence, to media we create ourselves--things like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat puts this power to create the idyllic in our own hands. What we have done is taken on the role of producer, editor, researcher, and psychologist ourselves in delivering media that presents a life that mirrors or echoes those many aspire to be: Popstars, dancers, footballers, and models.

Why would we share the sadness, loneliness and show vulnerability and honesty, when we can doctor images and videos and lie to ourselves and to our audiences? A strange sentence to write but it is something we do daily.

Tim Bono, in his 2018 book, *When Likes Aren't Enough*, outlines how this constant struggle to portray a life less ordinary can easily lead to significant mental health issues for a younger generation. Bono explains that, “The more time students reported spending on Facebook, the worse off they were in nearly every other aspect of their lives,”(Amazon Kindle). I have seen this echoed with my own undergraduate students, who are in their late teens and early 20’s, who explain that they go on nights out with “costume changes” to take pictures for Instagram or in some cases stage mini photoshoots in their own homes to present a “model lifestyle.”

Donegal philosopher and scholar, Christine Killen, has studied this cultural shift of social media portrayal at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen and below is an excerpt from a recent conversation we have had:

Me: “It seems that what we present is not being consumed in the way it was intended and only exists now to be digitally consumed.”

Ms. Killen: “People are actually employing strategists to boost their likes, shares and impact, *I will like yours if you like mine, follow for follow*, they do it to boost their own profile, not necessarily out of support for another peer.”

When discussing tips for social media, Killen outlined the following:

“Understand that the actual self is different to the ideal self, you can control every part of the online self, you are only ever going to show the ideal, mediocre is not enough, but it is often the truth”

For parents, Ms. Killen has the following words of advice:

“Be aware, you can’t pry too much, educate yourselves for your children, children don’t know the difference between actual and ideal self.”

For Millennials, Killen affirms that it is crucial to reinforce the view that:

“It is not real life, it’s snippet, or idealised.”

In relation to the future, the Lisooly native adds, “I don’t see things getting worse than things are right now. Adults and parents are aware; it’s an issue that has to be addressed in society that didn’t exist before. It is bad...really bad, but we can only go up from here.”

When probed about *Love Island* and the world of reality TV, Killen responded passionately by stating:

“It is junkfood for the brain. You don’t want to watch it. You know it’s not good for you, but you get sucked in. Meanwhile, you are not living your life—you are watching others live the constructed life they are given. They don’t set a good example. They are puppets of drama...it (just) makes good TV.”

Before we ended our conversation, Christine added that, for all readers, the following must be giving more attention:

“Males are overlooked in terms of social media and mental health; the focus is on women. Male mental health needs more attention, The situation is better than it was but not is enough being done.”

I echo Killen’s views. We are both Millennials but ones who remember a time before the squeals and squawk of a dial-up modem. As we become more connected as a society, we are forgetting about the connection beyond a screen. Armin Van Buuren and Lauren Evans demonstrated similar concerns in the lyrics of their 2013 song,

*Alone:*

Even time's in a rush  
But it's nowhere  
Everyone's connected but no one is connecting

The human in me is long and missing  
Tell me, have you seen it?  
Have you seen it?  
Or are we alone?

Romanian philosopher, Drula, outlines how the role of consumer and creator of media has become fused, which is accelerating this social shift:

“Mobile technologies are used as media tools both for consumption and production of news. The mobile environment permits easy and accurate identification of the audience, Web traffic, and the tracking of content usage.”

(50)

As we evolve into the “User-generated Content Generation,” we are also handing over our interests, our passions, our fears, and our locations to marketing and advertising software which is then translated by teams that, in turn, manipulate our media(like the

ads we receive in our Instagram and Facebook feeds), as well as our sense of self and wellbeing. As a result, the amount of data we produce every day is truly mind-boggling.

There are 2.5-quintillion bytes of data created each day at our current pace, but that pace is only accelerating with the growth of the Internet of Things (IoT). Over the last two years alone, 90-percent of the data in the world was generated (Marr 2018). Essentially, we are equipping technological and media powers with the data and knowledge to control us further and we must be vigilant. We are losing a generation to screens, screens for entertainment, screens to find friends (or, feel more alienated than ever before), screens to find love, screens to find ourselves (or, lose ourselves).

### *Final Thoughts*

Niamh Mullin, an Irish social worker from Tyrone, has these words of advice for parents, guardians, teachers, and community leaders:

“I feel, in our era, it is important to practice self-care whether it be as little as five minutes per day, it can have a positive effect on our overall mindset. I feel many people neglect themselves due to various things but something as small as taking five minutes to leave our phones down and focus on our thoughts can really nourish your body, mind and spirit. A lot of us spend more time than we realize scrolling endlessly through social media. I believe that reflecting each day on how you are using your phone can help you to see if it is a healthy or an unhealthy relationship that you have with it. Focusing on this, if you are scrolling for longer than you thought, you can use this time to do something productive or take this time to focus on your own self.”

Mullin a native Irish-speaker has worked with vulnerable adults throughout her career, “If you start with something small like this, then you are already making a conscious effort to improve your mental well-being.”

From a personal perspective, happiness and true happiness are two very different things. However, many do not see this. As a society, we need to be more mindful of who our audiences are. The world of media is literally in our own hands—that’s why we must increase our awareness of the mental health risks involved. Not just for Millennials, but for to every generation who has contact with technology. There are consequences to manipulating reality. Only time will tell how that affects our collective future.



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