

HAPPINESS

National happiness mapped over the last 200 years

Governments around the world are increasingly trying to measure people's happiness levels so they can find out how their policies affect wellbeing. However, 'happiness' data is generally only available from the last decade, which makes it difficult to study long-term trends or to find out what made people happy in the past.

Now, scientists from the University of Warwick, the University of Glasgow and the Alan Turing Institute in London may have found a way to establish historical happiness levels by studying millions of books and newspapers published from 1820 to 2009. According to psychological theory, you can gain an understanding about people's emotions through what they say or write, with publications reflecting the national mood.

In order to carry out the analysis, the main source of the language information came from Google Books corpora, which contains word frequency data for eight million books. The researchers' method calculated the values of happiness that can be derived from text – for thousands of words in different languages – to establish the relative proportion of positive and negative language for four different nations (the US, UK, Germany and Italy) through history.

This new method was compared to current survey-based measures and was

found to be an accurate way to establish national mood. By studying the data, the

researchers could see peaks and troughs in happiness over time, which often corresponded with key events, like the end of rationing, or recessions.

“What's remarkable is that national subjective wellbeing is incredibly resilient to wars. Even temporary economic booms

and busts have little long-term effect. We can see the American Civil War in our data, the revolutions of 1848 across Europe, the roaring 20s and the Great Depression. But people quickly returned to their previous levels of subjective wellbeing after these events were over,” said Prof Thomas Hills, who took part in the research.

The researchers also used the data to establish some interesting findings. For example, they found that one less year of war had an equivalent effect on happiness of a 30 per cent rise in GDP, and in post-war UK, the unhappiest period was the Winter of Discontent in 1978-1979.

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