



WE WANT YOU TO BE HAPPY

DUBAI WANTS ITS RESIDENTS TO BE HAPPY. TRUE BRIT ALISTAIR MACLENAN NATURALLY HAS HIS DOUBTS

According to one of the biggest selling songs of recent times, if you clap along when you feel like a room without a roof, you'll make Pharrell Williams happy. I can understand Mr Williams' point – I have camped out under African skies (to continue the song lyric theme) and felt blissfully happy staring at the Milky Way (one of the very few times I have seen it clearly).

But happiness is a tricky thing to measure; if I had to live in a room which was permanently open to the elements, it's likely that the joy of astronomy would quickly wear off.

The difficulty in measuring this illusive human quality has not stopped people from trying. The first ever United Nations High Level Meeting on happiness and wellbeing in 2012 gave birth to the World Happiness Report. For every year since, countries have vied (some more actively than others) to be the happiest place on earth – as I know you were wondering, this year it was Norway with an impressive score of 7.537. I don't know the units of happiness.

In the same report, the UAE was ranked 22nd, which is simply not good enough for the most outwardly-facing of the seven Emirates, Dubai. It wants its mainly immigrant residents to be the happiest in the world.

At this year's Esri User Conference in San Diego, I sat down with Dr Aisha Bin Bishr, the director general of the Smart Dubai Office, to find out more about how this tiny community of under three million, perched on and in many cases an alarming distance above the Persian Gulf, plans to make happiness the main driver of its public services and the foundation of the wider society.

Dr Bishr seemed extremely happy for someone with so much on her plate. To quote from the Smart Dubai website, her organisation wants to use technology to create happiness by 'making Dubai the most efficient, seamless, safe and impactful experience for residents and visitors'. The Emirate intends to be the smartest and most interconnected city on the

planet, full of happy people. But how will they know?

Addressing that measurement issue head on, Dr Bishr told me: "We have a very scientific approach to happiness, as we believe that happiness is attainable and measurable. The leadership wanted to know if people are happy with the city services they were receiving so we developed a simple touchpoint, the Happiness Meter, to collect and plot this data on a map."

The Happiness Meter is simple. It consists of three buttons: a smiley face; a not-bothered one way or the other face; and a sad face.

"Through this we will know instantly how people are enjoying our city, where there is anxiety (the project is also collecting social media keywords to help this plotting) and with this data we can continue to develop our services. We don't want to define happiness – your happiness is different to my happiness. We want to discover and understand people's needs and redesign our services so that we increase the happiness of people"

As I admitted during our conversation, my Britishness means I was born a sceptic. Grumpy may be a more accurate word, but I feel uneasy that any ruling outside organisation can create an algorithm that will ensure my happiness. Will people select the happy face out of habit or fear, or will they embrace this initiative fully and see it as a new way to interact with a government that truly cares about how they feel?

That this latter concept is so alien to me – and I suspect it is to many people in Europe and beyond – says as much about the government I live under and me, as it does about the residents of Dubai.

WILL PEOPLE SELECT THE HAPPY FACE OUT OF HABIT OR FEAR?

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