mediated communications (CMCs), in particular, communications on social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, YouTube and Second Life, amongst others, as well as other forms of digital communications such as, for example, mobile telephone communications, particularly in the form of SMS communications. A key claim the paper will seek to support through argument is that insofar as CMCs can potentially prove conducive to taraxia (perturbation of the mind or soul) they can reduce or undermine one’s capacity for ataraxia (inner-peace), which is a key feature of eudemonia: a life of reflective well-being lived in accordance with wisdom. As such, an aspiring wise person (AWP) should as far as possible avoid CMCs and only engage in them if necessary with caution and prudence. This is in keeping with the Stoic and Epicurean advice of ‘taking care of oneself - one’s soul and one’s character’.

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Wisdom on the Line: Understating the Role of Online Information in the Good Life

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Extended Abstract for ECAP 2009

0. Prolegomena

The primary aim of this paper is a follow-up and more detailed examination comprising the practical implications and potential consequences, which pertains to an earlier exploration of the axiological value of internet information for the good life, both with regard to individuals and society generally, that was first discussed in a paper presented at the CEPE 2009 conference in Corfu. In exploring the value of information for the good life, the paper will adopt a Socratic ground-up method of definitional enquiry (Benson 2000) to first determine (a) what information is and (b) what constitutes a good life (Spence in press 2009 and Spence 2007). Following that initial conceptual exploration, the paper will seek to further explore the relationship between information and the good life through an examination of the dual concepts of knowledge and wisdom

1 Surprisingly, very little has been written on this relationship in the philosophical literature, specifically with regard to information ethics. The main sources I will refer to in this part of the paper, but not exclusively, are Maxwell, N (2007); Tiberius, V. 2008; Vitek, B. and Jackson, W. (2008), Varelius, J. (2004); Kvanvig, L.J. (2003); Finnis (1983 and 1980); and generally the writings of Plato, Aristotle and the Hellenistic Philosophers (Epicureans, Sceptics and Stoics).

In the present paper the focus will be to examine the practical implications and potential consequences that the lack of wisdom in the production and communication of online information has for internet users who are actively engaged in computer mediated communications (CMCs), in particular, communications on social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, YouTube and Second Life, amongst others, as well as other forms of digital communications such as, for example, mobile telephone communications, particularly in the form of SMS communications. A key claim the paper will seek to support through argument is that insofar as CMCs can potentially prove conducive to taraxia (perturbation of the mind or soul) they can reduce or undermine one’s capacity for ataraxia (inner-peace), which is a key feature of eudemonia: a life of reflective well-being lived in accordance with wisdom. As such, an aspiring wise person (AWP) should
as far as possible avoid CMCs and only engage in them if necessary with caution and prudence. This is in keeping with the Stoic and Epicurean advice of “taking care of oneself – one’s soul and one’s character”.

1. Introduction: Practical Implications and Potential Consequences of Online Information for the Good Life

In examining the practical implications and potential consequences of online information for the good life, the paper will first explore the conceptual relationship and conceptual distinctions between information and knowledge on the one hand, and wisdom on the other. In sum, the paper will seek to show that although related, wisdom is conceptually distinct and conceptually different from both information and knowledge in a crucial way. For wisdom unlike information and first-order knowledge provides a person with understanding concerning the techne viou or craftsmanship of living in the sense of knowing how to apply relevant information or knowledge, virtuously and wisely, in the attainment of a good life and in addition knowing why such a life constitutes a good life. This is similar to the notion of wisdom defended by Sharon Ryan who in her article “What is Wisdom?” concludes that an accurate answer to that question is that “S is wise if S knows, in general, how to live well and if S has a general appreciation of the true value of living well (Ryan, 1999, pp.119-39). Secondly, by using that analysis I will seek to demonstrate two theses. The first thesis is that on the whole the production, communication and use of online information (for convenience, I will use the collective term dissemination to refer to all those modes of information) is not sufficient for wisdom. I refer to this as the sufficiency thesis. The second thesis is that online information not only is not sufficient for wisdom but overall it might even be detrimental to the acquisition of wisdom. It might in other words hinder one from becoming wise, either by precluding them from becoming virtuous or worse by rendering them vicious. I refer to this as the hindrance thesis. Hence, in accordance with the Sufficiency Thesis, it might be wise to avoid inundating oneself with too much information by exercising a critical self-reflective ignorance and thus in so doing avoiding the risk of information overload. Also in accordance with the Hindrance Thesis it might be wise to avoid inundating oneself with CMCs and thus in so doing avoiding the risk of interaction overload.

Together the two theses will show that the dissemination of online information, at least in its present form, is overall not of itself conducive to wisdom and hence not conducive to the attainment of the good life, since wisdom is a necessary condition for the attainment of a good life and wisdom is absent in the dissemination of online information unless it is externally imported by the disseminators themselves within a wisdom-neutral online environment. That is to say, the pre-existing offline wisdom of the disseminators of online information is external to the online informational environment, and unless they are already wise when they enter the online informational environment, it is highly unlikely that they would gain wisdom within the online informational environment. From this argument two conceptually distinct outlooks obtain: (a) a pessimistic outlook and (b) an optimistic outlook.

The pessimistic outlook

2 I owe this phrase to my colleague Adam Briggle who is presenting a paper on Interaction Overload at CEPE 2009.
If the above argument is sound, online information is not sufficient for wisdom and in might overall prove a hindrance to the acquisition of wisdom (either through information overload or interaction overload) and hence prove non-conducive to the attainment of a good life. As such, a wise person should, as far as possible, desist from entering online informational environments unreflectively, or if it is necessary that they do, exercise prudential caution when present in such potentially dystopian online-informational-environments (D-oies) lest they become corrupted by such environments to the detriment of their wisdom and their capacity for the attainment of a good life. Paradoxically, however, one could gain some wisdom from engaging with and participating in online informational environments (oies), negatively: that is, by acquiring meta-knowledge-how to the effect that such “oies” are potentially, at best, not very helpful in the pursuit of the attainment of the good life through wisdom (eudemonia), and at worse, potentially detrimental to eudemonia, in exposing one to the risk of having one’s virtue diminished or worse exposing one to the risk of becoming vicious. As such, such “online- wisdom” acquired purely online as a kind of meta-knowledge-how would also guide the aspiring wise person to desist from engaging with Oies unless wisdom itself overall counsels them otherwise.

The paper will provide illustrative cases drawn from potentially wisdom-less D-oies, such as, for example, Facebook, You Tube and Second Life amongst many others. A recent illustrative case is that of the Facebook “lynch-groups” that have posted the name, picture and address of a suspected arsonist who is alleged to have started one of the bushfires in Victoria, Australia, in which hundreds of people died. The alleged arsonist has not been tried by a court of law and as such should be presumed innocent until proven guilty. The paper will seek to show that this and other illustrative cases provide prima facie support and lend force to the pessimistic outlook. More generally and using Facebook as a generic case study, the paper will seek to show that the type of group computer-media-communications (CMCs) illustrated by the Victorian bushfire example, constitutes media corruption. Moreover, it will be argued that Facebook might be corrupting and degrading the value and practice of “friendship” as well as other values such as “justice”. As such, Facebook is potentially a viral D-oie, and should, as far as possible, be prudentially avoided by those who aspire to wisdom and the good life. Prudence in this paper will be understood as phronesis or instrumental rationality guided by virtue.

The optimistic outlook

If the above argument is sound, a wise person should not give up and flee online informational environments but fight to help construct neo-Socratic and neo-Stoic utopian online-informational-environments (U-oies) that are conducive to the acquisition of wisdom and the attainment of the good life for online cosmopolitans (Spence and Briggle, 2009 forthcoming). Such U-oies could potentially be constructed anew or within existing D-oies in the hope that the influence of such compartmentalized epicurean-online-gardens that promote and sustain online communal wisdom can exert a positive and eudemonic influence on some if not most D-oies, such as Facebook and Second Life, for example. Bearing in mind the sad example of Seneca, the Roman Stoic, however, a more modest and wiser choice, might be a flee-and-fight strategy in which D-oies are completely avoided and instead U-oies are built anew from the ground up as a type of a New Online Cosmopolis, which I refer to in the paper as Neophilosophia: a utopian
online informational environment for the use of persons who love and pursue wisdom for the attainment of the good life for themselves and for society as a whole.

In examining what place, if any, wisdom has in relation to the role that information plays in the pursuit and attainment of the good life, two questions present themselves that must be answered before proceeding any further: First, why is wisdom at all relevant to this enquiry and secondly, what is wisdom? I will provide answers to both questions in section (2) and (3) respectively.

2. The Normative Structure of Informational Action

The meta-theoretical framework, the Dual-Obligation-Information Theory (DOIT) which I have developed for the specific purpose of evaluating the normative commitments to which digital information gives rise (Spence, in press and 2007a) consists of two main inter-related sub-models that together demonstrate the universal normative structure of information and its global normative applicability: (A) The Inherently Normative Account of Information model (INAi) and (B) the Model of the Unity of the Right, the Good and the Good Life (MURG). Together these two sub-models are designed to demonstrate and explain the dual-normative structure of information by disclosing the underlying epistemological, ethical, axiological and eudemonic commitments to which it gives rise and by virtue of which all informational agents are universally bound with regard to informational action. INAI does so in terms of disclosing the epistemological and ethical principles and values inherent in information as a process of communication (Spence 2009 in press; and 2007a); and MURG does so in terms of universal rights (freedom and wellbeing) (Spence 2006; Gewirth 1978; 1996; and Beyleveld 1991) to which all informational agents are entitled by virtue of the inherent normative structure of action generally and information action specifically. In addition, on the basis of universal rights MURG demonstrates that these rights, in turn, give rise to prudential commitments to virtues, values and moral sentiments (the good) and to happiness, self-fulfillment (Gewirth 1998) or the preferred term used in this approach, eudemonia as the primary conditions for a good life (Spence, 2006, chapters, 5 and 10; Spence, 2007a and 2007b). In sum, together INAI and MURG are designed to be applied to objectively and universally evaluate the normative quality of digital information in terms of its ethical (universal rights), epistemological (knowledge and truth) axiological (values) and eudemonic (virtues and self-fulfillment) aspects.

Evaluating information using the proposed meta-theoretical framework provided by DOIT as instantiated jointly by INAI and MURG is essential for addressing all the key normative features of information (epistemic, ethical, axiological, and eudemonic) as they relate to and impact on all aspects of the lives of individuals and those of societies generally. The evaluation of information in terms of only one or two of those features will leave out something important that is of interest and concern to its disseminators.

Hence, together the two inter-related parts of DOIT demonstrate the doubly-normative structure of informational action, to which all informational agents, including the media, both new and old, are committed by universal necessity. Thus, information as communication can generally be epistemologically and ethically evaluated internally by reference to its inherent normative structure. That structure commits its disseminators, to ethical and epistemological norms, such as truth, truthfulness, and trustworthiness, among others. This is especially true of the media and its professional communicators such as Journalists and PR Consultants, for example, on-line and off-line.
In addition, the ethical values to which the inherent normative structure of information as communication gives rise requires that the informational agents’ rights to freedom and wellbeing must be respected, secured and promoted. Those values are mandated by the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) and therefore information can also be externally evaluated by reference to the PGC. In sum, informational action as both information and action is doubly normative.

3. From Information to Wisdom: Why is Wisdom Relevant for the Axiological Appraisal of Information?
Why is wisdom at all relevant to the role that information plays in a good life? Why not proceed directly to examining the role that information itself plays in the good life? Why do we need the concept of wisdom? The answer is fairly simple and straightforward. Wisdom is at once an axiological and meta-epistemological term that provides an immediate and direct conceptual link between information (an epistemological term) and the good life (an axiological term). As a meta-epistemological term, wisdom as a form of meta-knowledge (knowledge why) that both includes knowledge that and knowledge how, is capable of providing an individual with the necessary reflective knowledge and understanding in making judgments that concern and impact on different aspects of a person’s life for the ultimate purpose of assisting and guiding that person to lead and live a good life. For what would be the point of choosing and leading a life that was not at least in principle capable of providing a good life? Or at least, a life that is better with wisdom than without it. A basic pre-supposition of this paper is that wisdom is, all things being equal, a better guide for a good life than folly, its semantic opposite. Erasmus of course in Praise of Folly makes a case, albeit an ironic and satiric one, that Folly in fact is a better guide than Wisdom for a good life in this world. On the serious side, Erasmus, however, goes on to say in the last section of In Praise of Folly that only God is capable of wisdom, suggesting in effect that if human-beings are only capable of folly we should submit ourselves to the will and guidance of God. Being primarily a secular examination of the role of wisdom in a good life, this paper will not, however, pursue that theological line of inquiry interesting though it might be.

Yet another reason why wisdom is relevant to an enquiry concerning the role that information plays in a good life is that some of the issues with regard to the use of digital information qua good life relate not to moral or immoral conduct by an individual towards others but to the prudentially appropriate or inappropriate conduct of the individual in relation to themselves. For example, if an individual posts compromising pictures of themselves on Facebook or Myspace that causes no harm to anyone else but themselves, then the matter is not one of ethics but one of wisdom or at least prudence3 – how wise or prudent was the individual to do so, if the outcome of their foolish behavior

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3 The term prudence used throughout this paper refers to the virtue of prudence conceived as an enabling disposition or trait of character that has the tendency of preventing an individual of engaging in conduct that is likely to cause them harm. That is, conduct unbecoming of a virtuous person. Unlike the term instrumental rationality, which is a non-moral term and refers to the non-moral self-interest of an individual, prudence by contrast refers to the virtuous and hence moral self-interest of an individual person.
in a public cyberspace turned out to be harmful to themselves in some way – say, as a result of their foolish conduct that individual was fired from a job that they enjoyed.

If wisdom as meta-knowledge and a type of meta-information is relevant to the examination of the role that information plays in a good life we next need to determine what wisdom is.

4. Essential Characterising Features of Wisdom

Rather than attempt to offer a single definition for the term “wisdom”, which I consider both very difficult and not particularly useful to our present purposes, I shall instead offer an outline of some if not all of the central and essential characteristics of wisdom, at least those identified by various philosophers, both past and present. We can say in summary that wisdom comprises at least the following eleven essential characteristics:

1. It is a capacity to discover and achieve what is desirable and of value in life; a capacity to use and develop knowledge and understanding needed for the realization of value. Thus wisdom includes knowledge and understanding (Maxwell, 2007). It is a psychological capacity to judge rightly what should be done to make life better. This psychological capacity can be identified as a character trait (Kekes, 1995).

2. It is the virtue of reflection. It is a second-order virtue whose primary aim is the development of our character. Whereas first-order virtues guide our actions in view of our conception of a good life, second-order virtues such as wisdom, guide our actions with a view of developing the kind of character that reflects our conception of a good life (Kekes, 1995). This characterisation of wisdom as a second-order virtue is in keeping with Confucian ethics. For the goal of Confucius’ ethics is being an excellent person (Jiyuan Yu, 2006, p. 335), that is, a virtuous person not unlike the virtuous person of the Ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans. According to Jiyuan Yu, “appropriateness is the rational aspect of Confucius’ concept of virtue and it corresponds in many aspects to Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom”.

Phronesis, Aristotle’s term for practical wisdom and Confucius’ term of yi, which Jiyuan Yu renders as appropriateness fits well with the characterisation of wisdom as the virtue of reflection whose primary aim is the development of one’s character so that one knows how to behave appropriately on every occasion. That is, how to act virtuously in the appropriate manner required by the circumstances of a particular situation. According to Jiyuan Yu both Confucius and Mencius mean appropriateness as both an attribute of action as well as a rational aspect of a virtuous agent. He refers to the former as “outer appropriateness” and to the latter as “inner appropriateness” (Jiyuan Yu, 2006, p. 336). Notice, that this double-aspect of appropriateness is reflected by and is constitutive of my Model for the Unity of the Right and the Good (MURG) in that the universal rights to freedom and wellbeing an agent must respect in themselves and others corresponds to “outer appropriateness” and the good character that the agent must develop through the inculcation of the virtues as enabling disposition for righteous conduct corresponds to “inner appropriateness”. Appropriateness, as a meta-virtue of reflection underlies and guides the application of all the other
virtues. For courage and other virtues would not count as real virtues if applied in isolation and inappropriately. So, for example, according to Aristotle, and similarly Confucius (Jiuyuan Yu, 2006, p. 346) courage applied inappropriately would not be real courage but foolhardiness, as in the case of Aristotle.

3. It is a second-order reflexive virtue. The subject who has the virtue is the same as the object toward whom the appropriate actions are directed. The primary motivation behind the second-order and reflexive activities directed by wisdom is the desire to make our lives better (Kekes, 1995). Notice the similarity between Kekes and Maxwell in identifying the motivation for wisdom as the desire for making our lives better (see (1)). This establishes the essential conceptual and motivational connection between wisdom and the desire for a good life. Notice also how within the conception of a eudemonic model of a good life the desire for a good life is motivated and guided by virtue: the overarching second-order virtue of wisdom.

4. It is concerned not merely with means but also with ends (Kekes, 1995, Gewirth, 1978 and 1998). This characterisation of wisdom is closely aligned and in keeping with Gewirth’ Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC) as adapted and applied within my model of the Model for the Unity of the Right and the Good (MURG) that judges the goodness of actions both with regard to their means as well as to their ends.

5. It aims at the transformation of our character. The character we desire to have in relation to our conception of a good life. It is an intrinsic good and not merely an instrumental good for the means of attaining our conception of a good life, because the character we desire to have is an essential part of that conception (Kekes, 1995).

6. It is sound judgement involving the application of knowledge of good and evil to the evaluation of both means and ends constitutive of good lives (1995). Judgement is a process by which a decision is reached about what to do or not to do given the good the agent wants to achieve and the agent’s concrete situation (Kekes, 1995).

7. It involves a process of increasing our control by enlarging the area of our lives that we can order so as to conform to our conception of a good life. It is a process that requires our becoming the person our conception requires (Kekes, 1995). Notice how this process is in keeping with the notion of wisdom as a second-order reflective value whose primary aim is the development of character (see (2)).

8. It is a type of self-knowledge whose object is the knower’s character. It is a mode of reflection involving judgement whose aim is to make our character less fortuitous and more deliberate (Kekes, 1995). The process of acquiring self-knowledge is thus directed at the transformation of our character. In this way, judgement and control are conceptually connected. Self-knowledge is essential to this process because it is through it that we learn what the internal obstacles are and what we can do to cope with them or overcome them. In this way we acquire our moral identity that motivates us to the transformation of our character in relation to our conception of a good life (reference to Kekes, 1995). A crucial consideration that relates to this feature of wisdom, one that figures centrally in the notion of wisdom conceived by the Ancient Greek philosophers, including
Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans, is the notion of **epimeleia heautou**⁴, *taking care of oneself*, in particular taking care of one’s character, not merely theoretically through philosophical reflection but also most importantly in *practice* throughout one’s life. This is so because the cultivation of one’s character, a virtuous character, is an essential pre-condition for the attainment of a good life, both as a means and as an end. In this sense, a metaphor used regularly by the Greek philosophers, was that a person had to be a physician to one’s soul.

9. It is a type of *understanding* that requires an individual to combine pieces of information into a unified body of knowledge. Unlike the accumulation of piecemeal bits of information and knowledge, understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information (Kvanvig, 2003). As I mentioned earlier, understanding bears a close conceptual affinity with self-knowledge so that we can think of self-knowledge as a form of self-understanding. Ultimately, wisdom can be thought in a sense, as a type of self-understanding in relation to a conception of a good life that motivates and enables both its pursuit and its attainment.

10. Finally, wisdom as a type of meta-knowledge unlike information and knowledge is *not transferable*. Being necessarily embedded in one’s character wisdom can only be acquired through *life-experience*. Of course we can learn about wisdom and how to go about acquiring it from those who are already wise, but its acquisition must be *achieved* by us individually. Thus although *knowledge about how to acquire wisdom* is transferable, wisdom itself is not. To use a Stoic term, the acquisition of wisdom is a *katorthoma* or *achievement* not unlike, for example, training for and successfully running and completing a marathon. You can learn of course what you must do in training for a marathon but ultimately it is only *you* who can run the marathon, no one else can do it for you. Similarly, the acquisition of wisdom is of necessity a uniquely individual achievement. Using a Bernard Williams’ phrase, we can say that wisdom is radically first-personal. However, I must hasten to add that being first-personal wisdom does not preclude and indeed requires a wise person to be concerned with the well-being of others and society generally. For it is pre-supposed in the essential characterisation of wisdom outlined here that the wise person is of necessity a virtuous person and hence concerned with both their own well-being and that of others.

5. Application of the Concept of Wisdom for the Evaluation of Digital Information

In order to demonstrate how wisdom, as characterised above, can be applied in evaluating the dissemination and communication of digital information I will discuss at least five types of online behaviour based on real case studies that exemplify unwise conduct.

5.1 Out of Control and Out of One’s Control

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5.1.1 Marketing companies worldwide can now access with Facebook’s permission the personal information of its 150 million members. Individual members on Facebook might not know that their information is being accessed and processed for marketing purposes and even if they do know they don’t know who, why and how their personal information is being used both presently and in the future.

5.1.2 (A) A Sydney schoolgirl agreed to her boyfriend’s request to take a photo of herself naked and text it to him. A year later when they broke up the boyfriend sent the picture to other students and people outside the school; (B) Jesse Logan an 18-year-old from Ohio hanged herself after an ex-boyfriend distributed nude photos of herself she had sent him by SMS, which her peers used to bully her; (C) A New Jersey, 14-year-old schoolgirl has been accused of distributing child pornography after posting 30 or so pictures of herself on MySpace. If she is charged and convicted, she may have to register as a sex offender.

5.2 Cyber Bullying
The mask of anonymity afforded by cyberspace communication has allowed for the creation and proliferation of a new form of insidious bullying, that of cyber bullying in schools. A recent case involved cyber bullying by students in a school in Australia. Two girls from the private and prestigious Ascham girls school in Sydney were expelled from the school after it was established that they had used the network site www.myspace.com/gossipgirl-sydney to use information and post malicious comments about 31 other girls concerning their alleged sexual exploits, social climbing and drug and alcohol use (Sydney Morning Herald, May, 8, 2009).

5.3 Mob Mentality and Cyber Vigilantes
Thousands of members on a Facebook group have posted hate messages about a man suspected of starting the fires in Victoria, Australia, that resulted in devastating bush-fires which claimed the lives of hundreds of people. Posts on Facebook have published the man’s photo and address thus threatening the man’s life and breaching court orders. Although the man accused of lighting the fires has not been charged, tried by a court of justice or found guilty of any crime, the creator of one of the Facebook groups said she had not been aware of the court’s suppression order concerning the man’s identity but nevertheless she thought it was important for the families of those who died in the fires to be able to “place blame somewhere” (SMH, February, 17, 2009).

5.4 Conduct Unbecoming
A doctor (general practitioner) in Dubbo, a country town in Australia, posted three videos on You Tube under the pseudonym Funnisean showing himself posing as a female prostitute; ordering pizzas without bases from Domino’s Pizza in Dubbo and tying up the operator for several minutes; and asking a medical centre receptionist for a rectal examination with a Chinese doctor because they have smaller fingers and because the last time he had a similar examination with a Bangladeshi doctor with big fingers it caused him pain. This has angered a local member of parliament, who described the doctor’s conduct as unacceptable behaviour (Sydney Morning Herald, February, 2, 2009).

5.5 With friends like these, who needs friends?
In a sketch from comedians Idiots of Ants, a man knocks on the door of a schoolmate from 20 years ago and tries to “friend” him. As the scene plays out, it becomes painfully apparent the two thirtysomethings have nothing in common— in fact they don’t even like each other. By the end of the sketch the schoolmate is thoroughly confused and confronted by this sudden intrusion of online life into his real world. It’s funny but also serves to highlight a serious point. Maybe, just maybe, spending so much time socialising via SMS, Facebook, email, YouTube, blogs, MySpace, Bebo, Flickr, Twitter, 12Seconds, RSS Feeds, Digg or Friendster is not good for us (Nick Galvin, SMH Online, May 12, 2009).

References


