

# Government Nudge Units Find the “Best” Ways to Manipulate the Public

By [Marie Hawthorne](#)

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*Freedom of speech means a lot to us at the OP. However, that’s been fading fast, as [Daisy has documented](#), and as though speech restrictions aren’t bad enough, most of us have been lab rats for central planners’ behavioral experiments longer than we probably care to realize. And now there are Nudge Units.*

Huge amounts of money have been poured into “nudge research,” determining the best ways to get populations to change their behaviors without passing laws or using force.

## What are Nudge Units?

Let’s look at how these “Nudge Units” got started, what they’ve been used for most recently, and what they’re likely to focus on next.

The concept of “nudging” people into making better choices became popular with the book [Nudge—Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness](#), authored by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, and published in 2008. Their [book](#) defines a nudge as:

. . .any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates. Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not. (p.6)

*(You may be interested to note that author Sunstein is married to Samantha Power, the administrator of Biden’s US Agency for International Development and previously Obama’s ambassador to the UN. Forbes listed Ms. Power as the 63rd most powerful woman in the world in 2014. Do you think she’s Nudging? ~ Daisy )*

Individuals in government and industry quickly realized that the authors' insights into the decision-making process could be used to manipulate that process in the minds of the general public, many of whom don't have the time or mental energy for NYT bestsellers.

The British government established its first Behavioural Insights Team in 2010. It began as a seven-person team within a Cabinet Office nicknamed the "Nudge Unit" then became an independent social purpose company in 2014 before being purchased by [Nesta](#), a larger social purpose company, in 2021.

These social purpose companies employ experts in promoting desirable behaviors. So in Britain, for example, they want to cut obesity rates in half and reduce household carbon emissions by 28% by 2030.

I don't know how successful they've been in cutting obesity rates, but the Nudge Unit did prove its effectiveness early on by helping the British government collect an extra £200 million (about \$248 million) in taxes in [2017](#). Not surprisingly, the Nudge Unit has become so popular that they have worked with governments in over 50 countries and have opened subsidiary offices in the U.S., Singapore, Canada, Australia, Indonesia, Mexico, and France.

## What does a Nudge look like in the States?

Within the U.S., Nudge Units have been employed by health care systems such as [UPenn](#), and [Blue Cross Blue Shield Massachusetts](#). In a way, this isn't surprising; American and British citizens alike are known for high obesity rates and poor overall health.

Promoting good health within the general population seems like a good government goal, and I think most of us would have found this largely uncontroversial before 2020. We may not always have agreed with the FDA's exact dietary advice, but most of us would have probably agreed that we, as a nation, don't need quite so many candy bars.

However, during 2020, this changed. Public messaging around health care became far more intense, and some of the advice didn't make sense. At the very simplest level, what makes people healthy? Exercise and proper diet. Humans have known intuitively for a long time that sunshine is good for us. More recent research has shown that it [kills viruses and bacteria](#). So why were people being forbidden to exercise and even, in some cases, to go outside?

This article isn't really about the many possible reasons the public was given so much nonsensical advice during 2020 and 2021. I am just pointing out that, in some ways, the public health messaging campaign during Covid was seen by various governments (particularly the British) as an opportunity to see how far Nudging could influence actual behavior, even when the nudges didn't make logical sense.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view), governmental Nudging didn't influence people nearly as much as [various government bodies had hoped](#). In fact, *Nudge* author Thaler himself said that, when it came to increasing vaccine uptake, it was time for "pushes and shoves" in the form of passports and more severe restrictions.

But the pandemic is officially over, right? Does this really matter now?

Yes, it still does.

As we discussed before, the World Health Organization is set to ratify a new [pandemic treaty](#) in 2024. As discussed in our previous article as well as in Jose's more recent [article](#), we have plenty of reasons to believe that more pandemics will come along, and that the WHO will be taking precedence over local and even national governments to address them.

The WHO has grown a lot since its inception in 1948. It has had its own Behavioral Insights Team since 2017. And some of their work, like their campaign to prevent the over-use of antibiotics, has been really important. But just because they undertake some worthwhile projects doesn't mean we can assume everything they do is benign.

It's crucial to understand that there are no neutral Nudges. Richard Thaler points this out himself in an [interview](#) with Sydney Business Insights. You will always be asked to choose between one thing and another. Thaler also says in this interview that, within the original British Nudge Unit, their mantra was, "If you want people to do something, make it easy." Ask yourself, are people that constantly shoot for the lowest common denominator in a population the ones you want to take guidance from?

Perhaps more significantly, the WHO's new Chair of their Technical Advisory Group on Behavioral Insights (their Nudge Unit), Prof. Susan Michie, is an active member of [Britain's Communist Party](#). Are you comfortable with an avowed communist being responsible for subliminal messaging regarding your health choices? If you're a communist yourself, that might be great, but what about the rest of us?

The people behind the Nudge messages matter.

Do you want to get your relationship advice from Jordan Peterson or Andrew Tate? It'll make a difference.

And health care is only one area of interest in Nudging. Right now, in the U.S., that has been the main area of focus. However, since the first Nudge Unit developed in Britain and then expanded outward, it is reasonable to look to the British to see what may be coming next. As speculated upon by Laura Dodsworth in her recent interview with [Russell Brand](#), climate change rhetoric will likely ramp up.

We've already seen some examples of it. The same tools they might have been using ten years ago to get people to choose fruit as opposed to candy bars are now being used to get us to choose insect products instead of meat. This has had limited effect, as we've reported [before](#).

### How do they work?

Nudges work best for behaviors that people know they should pursue anyway. It's been difficult to Nudge people into doing things they find very unpleasant (like eating bugs) or may have moral qualms about (putting novel substances in their bodies).

So far, the usefulness of Nudging has been limited, but that may change within the next few years simply because messaging of all kinds is about to get so much cheaper, thanks to AI. ChatGPT and other similar programs will be able to churn out all kinds of little jingles useful not only for traditional companies but for social purpose companies and government programs, as well.

And as messages of all kinds become cheaper and cheaper to produce, the demands to

change our behavior for public health, or the climate, or whatever, will become more and more constant.

It's going to take more individual effort on our part to sort out the real information from whatever convenient narratives are currently being promoted. This will apply, not only to current-events type information but also to things like health and self-improvement.

I'll say it again because it's so important: There are no neutral Nudges. We are all constantly being Nudged in one direction or another. We can't escape Nudges, but we can choose which ones we give our attention to.

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*A lover of novels and cultivator of superb apple pie recipes, Marie spends her free time writing about the world around her.*

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