

MindSpace - A Guide to Behavioral Manipulation

Part II of the Series: Worldwide, social engineering has become standard operating procedure for governments

By [Elze van Hamelen](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

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By [Elze van Hamelen](#), September 20, 2022

The publication of the British report ‘MindSpace. Influencing behavior through public policy’ from 2010 seems to have been the worldwide kickstart of systematic application of knowledge from behavioral science to public policy and implementation. The report summarizes a century of behavioral science research, and provides recommendations on how governments can apply it.

MindSpace was compiled in response to a commission from top British civil servant Sir Gus O’Donnell and Sir Michael Bichard, head of the Institute for Government, a think tank that advises and supports the British government through research. Following this report, the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT, see main article) was formed, and Prof. David Halpern and Dr. Michael Hallsworth, who co-authored the report, later became CEO of BIT and “Managing Director BIT Americas,” respectively.

MindSpace distinguishes two ways of processing information: “reflective processes” and “automatic processes.” Reflective processes are used when we consciously process information, think about it and evaluate facts. Presenting facts so that people can make their own judgments and choices about them is what the report calls the “traditional

interventions” of policy. The contrasting model, on which behavioral scientists primarily focus, focuses on automatic processes, which proceed through an already present bias. Messages are shaped to be processed unconsciously. Attention is intentionally shifted from facts and information to influencing the context in which people act.

How does this work in practice?

In the article “MindSpace, Psyops, and Cognitive Warfare: Winning the Battle for the Mind,” which appeared on the site “Canadian Patriot,” poet David Gosselin describes in detail how these kinds of messages to “shift context” are constructed.

One example: The slogan “Stay home, save lives” seems very simple.

But, Gosselin writes, the unconscious message is, “If you don’t stay home, lives may be lost.”

The context or reality is framed as a binary choice – there is no room for the distinction that for most it is not dangerous to go out the door, and that it does not put others at risk. It distracts from facts, while the fear of killing reinforces the unconscious message. The message also reinforces a scapegoating process: those who dare just venture outside have no problem causing deaths! They are almost inhuman. During corona, we have been bombarded by such manipulative slogans and government campaigns that shift attention away from facts and toward an emotion-driven fictional picture of reality.

The word Mindspace is a mnemonic for officials for responding to bias, and automatic and unconscious processes:

Messenger: The messenger greatly influences how we take the message. This is why, for example, the government paid influencers to promote vaccination.

Incentives: rewards work strongly to motivate us, such as we can go “back to normal” if you get vaccinated, or “you can sit on the terrace again” if you show your QR-code.

Norms: We are strongly influenced by what others do. Therefore, not wearing a mouth cap when everyone in the supermarket has one on can be perceived as very threatening. Messages like “millions of people took this shot, and trusted the science,” also signal a social norm, fueling a need to join the group.

Defaults: We are quick to follow a preconceived easy choice. A vaccination bus stationed in front of a high school, or other accessible vaccination and testing sites support this.

Salience: Our attention is drawn toward new or salient information. To persistent infections and deaths in the headlines, for example.

Priming: These are small signals or messages, an image (people with mouth masks), feeling (mouth mask), and slogans, creating a subconscious idea that causes us to change our behavior. For how this works in practice, see [this](#) fascinating explanation of stage hypnotist Brian Halliday.

Affect: Emotions have enormous influence on our behavior and choices, communication campaigns therefore deliberately play on fear, shame, guilt, etc.

Commitment: Public commitment increases the likelihood that someone will carry out intentions. The statewide Corona Behavioral Team and the GGD conducted a field experiment to test this - people in a test lane filled out a survey afterward committing to compliance with the stay-at-home rule.

Ego: People like to maintain a good self-image. Speeches by president Mark Rutte: When you comply, you help society, and when you don't, you choose to perpetuate lockdowns and other measures.

Many people may have felt manipulated. When you see the science and organization behind the communication campaigns in context, it becomes clear how particularly sophisticated this large-scale manipulation campaign is.

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