

### Introduction

In 2010 the British Government commissioned research into influencing behaviour through policy. What they produced was a report describing how the MINDSPACE finding can be used to influence public behavior..

- **Messenger:** we are heavily influenced by who communicates information
- **Incentives:** our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts, such as strongly avoiding losses
- **Norms:** we are strongly influenced by what others do
- **Defaults:** we 'go with the flow' of pre-set options
- **Salience:** our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us
- **Priming:** our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues
- **Affect:** our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions
- **Commitments:** we seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts
- **Ego:** we act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves

Major principles of gamification are the same as in this report. Danger lies in the government using these techniques at the taxpayers expense to control the people.  
[http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MINDSPACE-Practical-guide-final-Web\\_1.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MINDSPACE-Practical-guide-final-Web_1.pdf)  
<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MINDSPACE.pdf>

### Messenger

*We are heavily influenced by who communicates information*  
 Our response to a message depends greatly on the reactions we have to the source of that information. We are affected by the perceived authority of the messenger (whether formal or informal): we are more likely to act on information if experts deliver it, but also if the messenger has demographic and behavioural similarities to ourselves. We are also affected by the feelings we have towards the messenger, so that someone who has developed a dislike of government interventions may be less likely to listen to messages they perceive have come from 'the government'..

### Incentives

*Our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts such as strongly avoiding losses*

### Incentives (cont)

The impact of incentives clearly depends on factors such as the magnitude and timing of the incentive. However, behavioural economics suggests other factors that affect how individuals respond to incentives.

The five main insights are: we dislike losses more than we like gains of an equivalent amount; we judge the value of money according to narrow reference points; we allocate money to different mental budgets, and are reluctant to move money between them; we over-estimate the likelihood of small probabilities; and we usually prefer smaller, more immediate payoffs to larger, more distant ones – but we don't differentiate between medium and long-term rewards. Finally, there is the danger that paying people to undertake an activity may reduce feelings that the activity is worthwhile in itself, making them less likely to do it for free in the future..

### Norms

*We tend to do what those around us are already doing Social and cultural norms are the behavioural expectations, or rules, within a society or group.*

Norms can be explicitly stated ('No Smoking' signs in public places) or implicit in observed behaviour (shaking the hand of someone you meet for the first time). People often take their understanding of social norms from the behaviour of others, which means that they can develop and spread rapidly through social networks or environmental clues about what others have done (e.g. litter on the ground).

### Defaults

*We 'go with the flow' of pre-set options*

Many decisions we take every day have a default option, whether we recognise it or not. Defaults are the options that are pre-selected if an individual does not make an active choice. Defaults exert influence because individuals have an in-built bias to accept the default setting, even if it has significant consequences. Many public policy choices have a no-action default imposed when an individual fails to make a decision. This default setting is often selected through natural ordering or convenience, rather than a desire to maximise benefits for citizens. Restructuring the default option can influence behaviour without restricting individual choice.

### Salience

*Our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us*  
Our behaviour is greatly influenced by what our attention is drawn to.<sup>8</sup>

Simplicity is important here because our attention is much more likely to be drawn to things that we can understand – to those things that we can easily encode. And we are much more likely to be able to encode things that are presented in ways that relate more directly to our own personal experiences than to things presented in a more general and abstract way.

In our everyday lives, we are bombarded with stimuli. As a result, we tend to unconsciously filter out much information as a coping strategy. People are more likely to register stimuli that are novel (messages in flashing lights), accessible (items on sale next to checkouts) and simple (a snappy slogan).

### Commitment

*We seek to be consistent with our public promises & reciprocate acts*  
We tend to procrastinate and delay taking decisions that are likely to be in our long-term interests.<sup>9</sup> Many people are aware of their will-power weaknesses and use commitment devices to achieve long-term goals. It has been shown that commitments usually become more effective as the costs for failure increase: for example, making commitments public, so breaking the commitment leads to reputational damage. Even the very act of writing a commitment can increase the likelihood of it being fulfilled, and commitment contracts have already been used in some public policy areas.. Finally, we have a strong instinct for reciprocity, which means that, for example, accepting a gift acts as a powerful commitment to return the favour at some point – hence the popularity of free samples in marketing.

### Priming

*Our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues*

Priming is about how people's behaviour is altered if they are first exposed to certain sights, words or sensations. In other words, people behave differently if they have been 'primed' by certain cues beforehand. Priming seems to act outside of conscious awareness, which means it is different from simply remembering things. The discovery of priming effects has led to considerable controversy that advertisers – or even governments - might be able to manipulate us into buying or doing things that we didn't really want.. Subsequent work has shown that primes do not have to be literally subliminal to work, as marketers have long understood. In fact, many things can act as primes, including words, sights and smells. The effect of priming is real and robust; what is less understood is which of the thousands of primes we encounter each day have a significant effect on the way we act.

### Ego

*We act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves*

We tend to behave in a way that supports the impression of a positive and consistent self-image. When things go well in our lives, we attribute it to ourselves; when they go badly, it's the fault of other people, or the situation we were put in – an effect known as the 'fundamental attribution error'. We think the same way for groups that we identify with, to the extent that it changes how we see the world. We also like to think of ourselves as self-consistent. So what happens when our behaviour and our self-beliefs are in conflict? Often it is our beliefs that get adjusted, rather than our behaviour.. It has been shown that once people make initial small changes to their behaviour, the powerful desire to act consistently emerges – the initial action changes their self-image and gives them reasons for agreeing to subsequent requests. This challenges the common belief that we should first seek to change attitudes in order to change behaviour.

### Affect

*Emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions*

Affect (the act of experiencing emotion) is a powerful force in decision-making. Emotional responses to words, images and events can be rapid and automatic, so people can experience a behavioural reaction before they realise what they are reacting to. Moods and emotional reactions can precede and override more 'rational' or cognitive decision-making, resulting in decisions that appear contrary to logic or self-interest. For example, people in good moods make unrealistically optimistic judgements; those in bad moods make unrealistically pessimistic ones..

