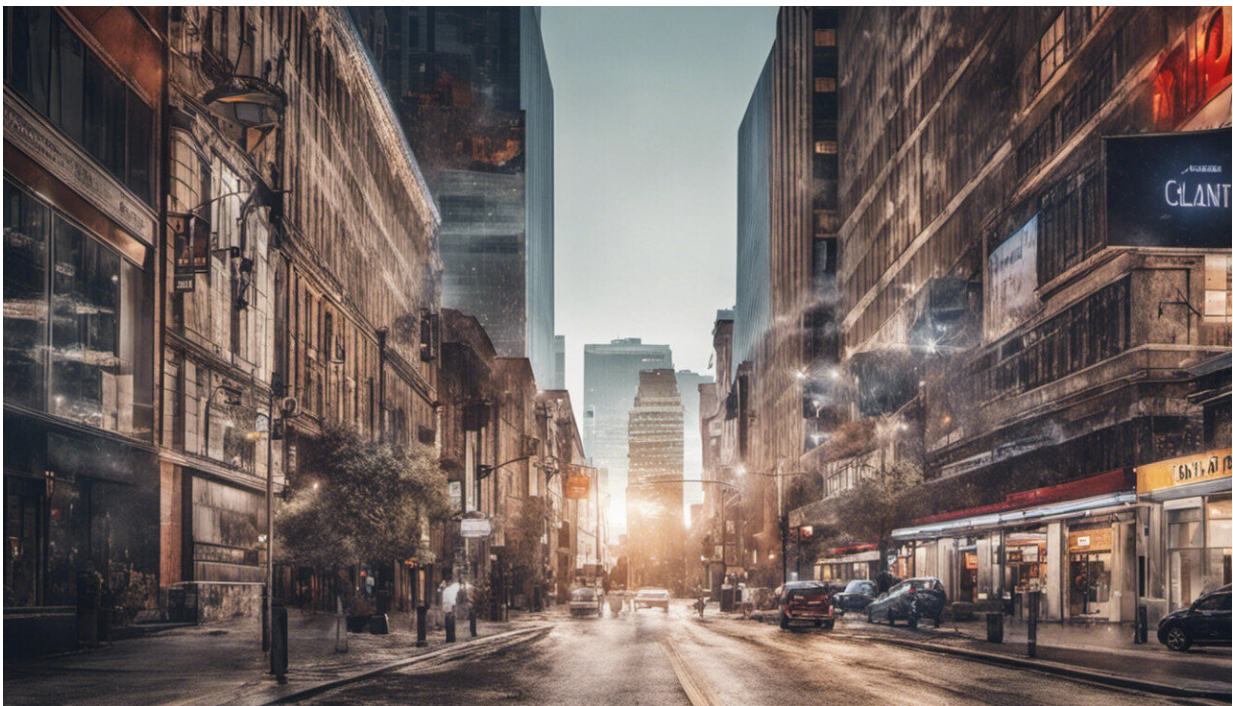


Journalists needs to be more critical of the way governments use 'nudging' to change our behavior, says researcher

April 11 2023, by Lars Tummens



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Suppose you are in a pub with friends. You drink a few beers, have a good time, and head home. The following morning you realize your headache is milder than usual. You then discover that you were part of an experiment where the glasses at the pub were 25% smaller.

In their [landmark 2008 book](#), *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, behavioral economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein defined a "nudge" as an intervention "that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives".

Imposing higher alcohol taxes is not nudging, because it changes the costs to the drinker. Offering smaller glasses, by contrast, is. It does not forbid alcohol. And since prices are adjusted for glass size, people still only pay for what they consume.

But, as a 2018 [study](#) led by psychologist Inge Kersbergen [shows](#), it does encourage less drinking: 30% less, to be precise, when the glasses are a quarter smaller. This, Kersbergen's team estimated, could lead to 1,400 fewer deaths and 73,000 fewer hospital admissions annually in the UK alone—the very definition of a successful nudge.

More than [200](#) institutions (including the [United Nations](#) and the [World Bank](#)) and governments (from [Australia](#) to [Qatar](#)) use nudging to get us to behave in ways that—according to them, at least—are more beneficial.

But the question of who stands to benefit is where nudging courts controversy. If you'd spent the evening drinking out of smaller glasses, you might feel psychologically manipulated—even if, physically, you felt good.

So, given the popularity nudging has gained as a public policy tool, gauging how the media—whose remit is to hold authority to account—evaluates it, then, is crucial. [My research shows](#) that if governments like to nudge us in all spheres of public life, journalists largely applaud them for doing so.

How the media views nudges

The US and the UK are frontrunners in using nudging in [policy-making](#). To gauge how the British and American press evaluate this, from 2008 to 2020, I analyzed 443 newspaper articles (opinion pieces, editorials, [news articles](#), reports) from major broadsheets, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Sunday Times, The Guardian and the Financial Times.

Of the 1,186 quotes I identified, 65% scored as positive coverage and 35% as negative. Positive coverage cut across partisan lines. Left-leaning newspapers had more positive than negative quotes (a 1.6 ratio: for every eight positive quotes, there are five negative ones). For rightwing outlets, the distribution was even more skewed (a 2.2 ratio: 11 positive quotes for every five negative ones).

When Thaler was awarded the 2017 Nobel prize for his contributions to behavioral economics, coverage was largely positive. Journalists highlighted nudge initiatives inspired by Thaler's insights, including [text messages](#) sent to university students' families on how they might help them succeed in their studies and [a 2012 British policy](#) that auto-enrolled workers in pensions-saving programs.

I found that the media often highlighted nudge victories. Writing in the Observer in 2018, journalist Ben Quinn [described](#) some physicians cutting unnecessary antibiotic prescriptions by 3.3%, after they received a letter showing that they prescribe more than their peers. This, to Quinn's mind, showcased the value of "social norm nudges".

I also found the media often argued that both citizens and politicians favor nudging. Writing in The New York Times in 2018, [about behavioral economics as a growing trend](#), marketing expert David Gal noted:

"The popularity of such low-cost psychological interventions, or 'nudges', under the label of behavioral economics is in part a triumph of marketing. It reflects the widespread perception that behavioral economics combines the cleverness and fun of pop psychology with the rigor and relevance of economics."

Political faultlines

I found that when journalists did criticize nudging, their political leanings became apparent. Early on, critics feared that governments would use nudges to their advantage. In his [review](#) of Thaler and Sunstein's 2008 book, the Sunday Times's Bryan Appelyard argued that "we are going to be manipulated all the time".

In a *New York Times* magazine report from 2010, meanwhile, US political journalist Benjamin Wallace-Wells [highlighted](#) that conservatives tended to see something nefarious—"a Big Brother strain"—in behavioral economics. He referred to rightwing political commentator Glenn Beck [calling](#) Sunstein "the most dangerous guy out there" because Sunstein's expertise was, to Beck's mind, making some things, such as buying a gun, more difficult.

In the UK, the [Behavioral Insights Team](#) (BIT)—nicknamed the "[Nudge Unit](#)"—was set up in 2010 as part of the UK Cabinet Office, before becoming an independent advisory body in 2014. In October 2017, BIT issued guidance for parents that said that praising children might stunt their progress. It was roundly criticized, with the conservative Scottish Daily Mail [running a piece](#), under the subhead (in the print version) "Nanny state tells us how to praise kids".

Progressives, by contrast, attacked nudges for being too laissez-faire and inadequate as a tool for tackling deep-rooted problems such as poverty. As economics reporter Eduardo Porter [put it](#) in a 2016 *New York Times*

report:

"It's great to know that there are promising ways to improve society by developing a smarter email or changing the default choice on an application form. But if the question is whether policy makers can cheaply nudge Americans out of destitution onto a path to prosperity, the answer must be no."

Even as Thaler received the Nobel prize, The New York Times's Aaron E Carroll [discussed](#) the limits of [behavioral economics](#) as made clear by healthcare. Researchers had used several techniques, including what they termed "social support nudges", to get people to take their pills. All had failed. Carroll said,

"The problem is that health has so many moving parts. The health care system has even more. Trying to improve any one aspect can make others worse. Behavioral economics may offer us some fascinating theories to test in controlled trials, but we have a long way to go before we can assume it's a cure for what ails Americans."

It should be noted that many of the media proponents of nudging are actually academic experts. Those critical of the practice, however, get less exposure.

Nudging can be effective. It will not, however, fix all societal ills. And sometimes it can backfire. If the press is to fulfill its crucial role in holding politicians to account, it should be critically assessing how our governments are using this subtle tool to influence our behavior.

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