Patrick Fagan — Transcript

Will Jones (interviewer). Patrick Fagan is a behavioural scientist with over a decade's experience applying behavioural psychology to consumer behaviour.

So I have a friend and he's probably the smartest friend I have, but during the lockdowns, I met him for dinner and he put on a mask to go into the restaurant. And then when he sat down, he took it off. And then to go to the bathroom again in the same restaurant, he put it back on.

And I was so shocked as to how somebody so smart could do something so stupid. And I'm sure we all have experiences of things like that or things that we've seen online, people wearing masks by themselves and cars, for example, and as a psychologist it really posed a question of what happened, Why would people do this? How could all this happen?

Part of the answer is that all of us are what's known as cognitive misers. So we have very limited brain power for paying attention to the world, for processing information. You know, the world is literally infinitely big. There's an infinite amount of choice and information out there, and we just can't process it all consciously. So we have to rely on very quick, easy shortcuts when we are processing information and making decisions. These shortcuts are called heuristics.

So generally, someone in a white lab coat tells us to do something, they probably know what they're talking about and we should listen to them. And that's called authority as a bias. And it generally works quite well.

But of course, there are times when it can go wrong. You know, famously in the Stanley Milgram experiments where I think about 2/3 of people would administer what they thought was a fatal electric shock to somebody because someone in a white lab coat asked them to.

So we rely on these shortcuts, but they can leave us vulnerable to bias. And so what people can do if they understand these shortcuts and these psychological processes is design messages and interventions that kind of hijack or hacks these processes and make people more likely to behave in a certain way.

So what we have here, for example, is a text from the NHS for the COVID vaccine where in just 19 words they've managed to pack at least 6 so-called nudges, 6 of these kind of levers that work on psychological biases. The 19 words being : you have reached the top of the queue and are a priority for getting a free NHS COVID-19 vaccine.

So in saying there's a queue that's a nudge called social proof, where if it's popular it must be good. Saying you have reached the top of the queue, that's a nudge called commitment, where you feel invested, you don't lose your place in the queue. Having you at the top of the queue and calling your priority is using an ego appeal probably, so you feel special. But also saying you're a priority is a scarcity nudge. So it feels like demand is bigger than supply and you feel this this urgency to go and get it. Giving the vaccine for free is making it as easy as possible, which is very important in behavioural science, but also maybe using a reciprocity nudge so you feel a bit indebted to return a favour. And finally having it come from the NHS is using messenger effects where people are more likely to do something for someone they like or trust and people like and trust the NHS, or at least they used to.

But there's just 19 words there and six nudges packed in. So it's a very masterful example of how to use these psychological processes.

When we're thinking about the vaccine campaign in general, you can see these nudges all over the place in the messaging and the interventions. For example, there was an ad aimed at younger people saying don't miss out on your COVID jabs, don't miss out on going clubbing. That's using psychological principle called loss aversion to make people feel like they'll be missing out on something, which is particularly prevalent among younger people when it comes to social benefits. They don't want to miss out socially. They have that fear of missing out. Also in the same ad, they say over 2/3 of 18 to 13 year olds have already had their first COVID jab.

And there's another ad that says join the millions already vaccinated. And again, that's social proof that we talked about. So if it's popular, it must be good.

They also say we'll let you know when your COVID vaccine is ready for you. That's using something called the endowment effect, where if you feel like you own something already, you don't want to lose it.

And this is rather strange ad from the NHS, the Get Your shot ad where they have young people implied on drugs and being promiscuous. And this is a health campaign advert to get people vaccinated, which is rather odd. But again, it's using these nudges of don't miss out, bond with your friends, etcetera.

So behavioural scientists' fingerprints all over the messaging and the interventions. And they're not particularly shy about it. They've published many, many, many papers about how behavioural science can be and was used to influence vaccine uptake. For example, the Behavioural Insights Team, also known as the Nudge Unit, published the results of a study where they found that willingness to get vaccinated was higher after seeing messaging suggesting that the vaccine would protect loved ones, that doctors and nurses have taken the vaccine, or that it's the route to quote getting our lives back.

And so there will be these kind of nudges that they are quite open about using.

That's the open side. There may be a bit more of a murky side where the kind of behavioural science principles, the psychological principles were used less explicitly, but nonetheless used.

For example, there have been exposes around how opponents of vaccines and lockdowns were smeared and attacked by, for example, Logically AI, Big Brother Watch, announced that they have received lots of money from the government and they did all these kind of attack articles. They did one on me as well. Critics of the vaccines were kind of shut down and these tactics of conformity and authority and ostracization were used.

And so we can kind of intuit that behavioural science was used behind the scenes in certain ways, in a less explicit way than we saw earlier, like for example, very heavy leverage of in-group bias. So making people feel like if they do take the vaccine, they're a good person and they're part of the special group. And then people don't take it or who question it, they have something wrong with them, but they're also part of the out-group and they should be kind of ostracised and punished as a result, as Andrew Neil famously said.

And this is leverage, for example, maybe behind the scenes through these people being encouraged to write these kind of articles, but also things like the I've had my COVID vaccination sticker, which is kind of a identity badge that signals you're a good person and in the right group and so on.

There's the illusion of choice through things like no jab, no job, where kind of acting as though you have a choice between these two things. A bit like when a waiter asks if you want still or sparkling and you feel like you have a choice but you still end up giving them money.

Or likewise choose between Pfizer or Moderna. It's kind of the illusion of choice. And with the NHS it was very interesting because I think they recalled that threat the day before it was supposed to come due. So in the end they can still say nobody was forced to take the vaccine in the NHS. It was always your choice and that makes people more likely to comply if they feel like they had a choice.

And then there was what's called meta nudging, which is quite a new field of research, but it's basically nudging people indirectly. So getting influencers to do it, which we saw through campaigns targeting minority ethnic communities.

Now quite an important principle which you really saw leverage through the safe and effective messaging is protection motivation theory. If you want people to do a protective behaviour like quit smoking or take out insurance or in this case take a vaccine, there are two levers that you want to pull essentially. One is risk to make people feel like the bad outcome will happen to them and it will be severe if it does happen to them. And the other lever is efficacy. So make them feel like they can do something about it. And if they do that thing, it will work.

So you saw this with the look them in the eyes messaging. So you had that scary picture and the message looked them in the eyes. You're ramping up the fear, which is that one lever of risk. And then the other lever was ramped up by saying look them in the eyes and tell them. you always wear a mask, so it's giving people that direction for the kind of fear and emotion that you've stoked in them.

So you can think of it a bit like kettling. A kettle works by applying heat and then containing the water, so the particles kind of bouncing around and heating up and then you have that release valve of the spout. So with behaviour, you want to put the steam in the engine that is emotion and work people up and heat them up a bit, make sure their behaviour is contained and they have one particular route to express the behaviour so that emotion kind of goes somewhere.

So in the first part of kind of energising and applying heat, we saw of course people were very scared. Fear is the oldest and the strongest emotion, as HP Lovecraft put it. But we know from brain imaging research, it probably is the strongest emotion.

And you can see the you Gov data, people were scared. There was that big spike in fear. In the week when the spike was highest. There was a SPI-B report, which is the behavioural science kind of subset of SAGE where they said a number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened. The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent using hard-hitting emotional messaging. So there was a deliberate scheme, it seems, to ramp up that emotion, to turn up the heat.

There's the containing element, which of course is locked down, taking away people's usual sources of catharsis. Couldn't go out drinking on a Friday night you couldn't go to watch a sports match, you can go to the gym or the park even. All these ways that people usually get their stress out. It's a beautiful kind of locked up, cooped up.

And we'd know from research from Israel that the amygdala, which is in basic terms like the emotion or stress processing part of the brain, grew under lockdown. And when lockdown ended, it went back to baseline levels. So that kind of containing actually made people more stressed.

And then finally, the spout, which is directing this emotion, this energy in a particular direction that's brought to life quite nicely by this music video, I suppose, from James Corden.

So a little of that stress and emotion, there was one very clear singular way out of it, one point of focus for people, which was of course the vaccine and at the same time any other way out, any other spout seem to be shut off like ivermectin was smeared, with the FDA saying it was horse paste. That's psychological weapon is very advanced psychology calling it horse wormer because it's disgusting and it's very visual and an example of what's called inoculation because most people's first exposure to ivermectin was it being called horse wormer? So then if they ever heard of it after that, they would think that it was ridiculous and they wouldn't take it seriously.

This tweet from the FDA calling it something for horses was of course retracted recently, but possibly an example of these other spouts being closed off. So all that energy and focus is directed towards the vaccine.

So I co-wrote a book that was published last year where we looked at cults and brainwashing and how not to be brainwashed, and I kind of worked out nine principles that make for brainwashing, which is changing people's entrenched habits into something else.

And the vaccine campaign seems to tick up these boxes. For example, brainwashing often involves bamboozling people. So it could be in the extreme, interrogating prisoners by forcing them to listen to Baby Shark on repeat all night, which happened in a prison in the US.

But here, as I said, people are really bamboozled with fear and just overwhelmed suddenly a kind of shock and awe campaign. Rationalisation is about giving people a bit of a placebo rationalisation to do something. So this is of course all of the safe and effective. Here's the reasons why you should take it, which may not always hold up to scrutiny.

Attachment is about giving people something secure to cling onto, like that group of people who've had the vaccine, that identity, that sense of purpose. Increments is about doing things very slowly rather than all at once. So for

example, saying you just need one shot, OK, it's just two, OK, it's just a yearly booster, etcetera, etcetera. So kind of up slowly.

Norms is about making it seem popular and endorsed by authorities, which of course it was. Wishes is about what's the emotional reason, what's the wish fulfilment that comes about from the new behaviour. And this of course is wanting to be free from lockdowns or be part of a special group.

Autonomy. We've talked about that illusion of choice. There was lots of symbolism involved like NHS heroes and the rainbows and so on. And finally there's this element of kind of conditioning and utopia/dystopia, like saying no one's safe until everyone's safe to direct behaviour in a certain direction.

So not to put too fine a point of it, it does have some of the hallmarks, I believe of cults and brainwashing.

I do finally want to make the point about ethics in terms of behavioural science here, because psychology does, to say the least, have a chequered past with ethics. And it was quite depressing I would say, to see some of those issues come up again over the last few years, not least that behavioural science was very explicitly and openly used to promote the vaccine. And then people did die from the vaccine, at least a small number of people. I don't think anyone would deny that. And I haven't seen any contrition or kind of reflection on whether that's OK for behavioural science to do that. If you nudge some people into taking the vaccine and one person dies, is that OK? What's the cost benefit analysis? I didn't see anything like that.

But also there's these three principles that famous behavioural economist Richard Thaler proposed for ethical nudging, it being optional, transparent and beneficial to the person being nudged. I don't think any of these really stand in this campaign, certainly wasn't optional. You're bombarded with these nudges constantly with quite at the time it seemed severe outcomes for not complying.It wasn't transparent. I don't think there was any kind of explicit warning that nudges were being used on people, particularly in more covert means like through the media and then beneficial where I think other people today will have a better view on that.

Thank you, Patrick, that was fascinating. What would you say to those who would say that hits kind of nudging is better than forcing or coercing people. What would you say to that?

Well, in a way that's true.It’s better than putting a gun to someone's head. But the issue is it's not as transparent. And so in a way it is still forcing people to do something. It's just that they may not be aware of it. So it's a bit like a magician with a deck of cards and they ask you to pick one, but you don't realise that the deck is stacked against you. Literally, it's better than the real brute force, but it doesn't mean we have to accept these nudges as they're being used on us.

Yeah, because people might be worried about the covert nature of it. And what am I being influenced to do? How are they manipulating me? So do you think it can ever be ethical?

Yes and no. All communication is designed to influence. So even these words and putting them together in a particular order to try and influence what people think. Everything is influence.

What can make it ethical? There's a few things. One is empathy. So not using it for things that would harm people, but also not using it in a way that harms people. So not using fear or guilt or ostracising as a way to get people to comply. Even in psychological experiments in university, you have to get ethical approval, which is not easy if you want to scare people in your experiment. And then usually afterwards you need to put them in a good mood again by showing them a funny video or something. So I didn't see any of that over the last few years.

So there's empathy. I think humility is also very, very important. That's realising that everyone is irrational and biased, all of us. The nudgers are irrational and they may think that they have people's best interests in mind, but they are irrational and biassed themselves. So they need to be aware of unintended consequences and they need to be aware that people ultimately I think the collective, the mass organism of society, in the end it does make the best collective decisions for itself by itself and trying to guide and control and force people in history, I don't think it works out that well. So humility is important.

And then finally, respect, which is about being transparent about what you're doing and giving your nudgees, your recipients, a voice. And if they want to opt out, let them opt out and just accept: no means no. If you try and nudge them, it didn't work. You have to let it go.

So why do you think everybody fell for it? What made some people different?

That's a very interesting question that I've been thinking about a lot. I think there are certain personality traits. So I think the people who didn't comply are a bit less agreeable. I mean that makes sense that disagreeable people are less likely to agree. Of course, that's kind of painted in these studies as non compliance, being selfish or having dark traits, being psychopaths, which is quite a nasty way to put it. I think it's just a bit more sceptical, maybe a bit more cynical, less likely to just go along with things, which is often a good thing in history. I'm sure we can think of examples where it's not a good thing just to agree with the crowd and with authorities.

Also more of a reliance on gut intuition and not kind of falling down intellectual rabbit holes. As George Orwell said, there are some ideas so absurd only an intellectual could believe them. So I think having that attachment to common sense is quite a differentiating factor as well.

And you're using disagreeable there in a technical sense, like because I would understand it to mean unpleasant. Do you mean it in terms of not inclined to easily agree?

Yes, in a technical sense. So there's a personality trait called agreeableness which is about being cooperative and trusting and kind of empathetic and warm and on the other side you have disagreeableness, which sounds on the face of it like it could be a bad thing, but it's not it's just a different thing and it has benefits and disadvantages depending on context, but it's about being as I said more sceptical, maybe a bit more distant from people. But these are not necessarily bad things they can actually, as we've seen in the last few years, be good protective things.

What does the future hold?

It doesn't look good. I think this is moving in quite an advanced direction thanks to technology. I mean if you think about VR and AR, people will be very easily fooled and generative AI is going to be very hard to tell the difference between reality and fantasy even harder than it is. So that will be one way through which people are manipulated.

You have hyper targeted and personalised manipulation because you can read people from their data points that they leave around when they use their online banking or they go on social media. They leave these digital footprints which can be used to tell really quite personal psychological things about people and then target nudges towards them. And you have AI which will be able to supercharge that.

And then you have technology like Neuralink which will be able to read and change people's minds directly at the source.

So it's moving into this kind of hyper nudging, I think. So it's never been more important for people to know these techniques and know how to resist them.

So it sounds kind of depressing and a little bit dystopian. So do you have any advice for people about how they might resist it?

For the book, I interviewed a magician and I asked him, if you don't want to be tricked by a magician, what should you do? And he said very simply, don't go to the circus. And so that's probably one of the best tips is just kind of disconnect a bit. I mean, no man is an island completely, but just use social media less. You don't have to not use it at all, but just use it less. Watch TV less and then also things like mindfulness can help being more in touch with your gut intuition and your common sense. And there is a level of inoculation that you can get. So that means reading up on these techniques and being more aware of them makes you more likely to spot and resist them in the wild.

Thank you, Patrick.