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**Nudge: Behavioural Science, Normative Discourse, and the Art of Consent**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the rise of Behavioural Science or Nudge theory (as it is conventionally known) in relation to its use during the pandemic. As a disciplinary technique, nudges have helped to establish political narratives that have been used to dominate popular discourse during the last twelve months or so. The notion of a new normal, for example, establishes new social parameters and modes conduct, that are regulated via a range of coercive techniques including policing, peer pressure, and a culture of shaming that has emerged to facilitate disciplinary normalisation Indeed nudges have been instrumental in promoting obedience and conformity in British society as the contemporary norm, in which citizens who do not concede to these values are depicted as being anti-social, rule-breakers, deviants, dangerous conspiracy theorists, or covidiots. This chapter, therefore, considers how various norms have been mobilised in an attempt to contain the spread of infections and maintain order in the UK. As a strategy of social control, the new norms to which we concede will be with us for years to come and it is the responsibility of free thinking citizens to express concern.

The dominant focus for this chapter will be the events (policies and actions) that transpired during the early stages of the pandemic in the UK through to the time of writing. As there is currently no indication of an end to the crisis (and with the identification of new mutated strains of Covid-19 in the UK, Africa and Brazil), further measures are likely to be introduced to implement even stricter border controls, impede the movement or activities of the population, and encourage the use of biometrics and vaccination passports, before society is allowed to reopen. In so far as the chapter explores social phenomenon such as disinformation and fake news (and the responses from the establishment), care has been taken to adequately frame such practices in academic discourse, because for one, this is a critical inquiry into such themes, and two it would be easy to condemn the potential findings as conspiratorial – thus perpetuate dominant state narratives that defame and isolate contrary opinions to those of mainstream political thought. The study has generally been restricted to the activities and policies established during the first national lockdown in the UK, primarily because this was the key moment in which the new normal was established, but also because British society was unprepared for a transition on this scale - from its usual way of life, to one of confinement.

**Methodology**

The methodology for this chapter is derived from social and political theory, and contemporary governance/ statecraft via the human sciences. First, the chapter borrows from the extensive body of literature developed by Michel Foucault with regards to concepts such as biopolitics, govenmentality, security, racism, genealogy, and the state. Second, the chapter utilises the above critical frame thought which to analyse modern techniques of government such as the use of behavioural psychology to foster compliance during the pandemic. The aim of this particular study is to examine broadcast and social media (and out of home advertising techniques), used here for the dissemination of key public messages, and to consider how new social norms have been established during the crisis using said technologies.

With regards to the ideas and work of Michel Foucault, largely the chapter examines various actions and ideas that exist in the public domain, and thus constitute statements in the public archive (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 29). Statements in the Foucauldian context can be found in a plethora of places and generally represent popular opinion, a dominant state ideology or doctrine, and those belonging to public policy. Undertaking Foucauldian discourse analysis involves first appreciating that discourse can be a series of practices or actions as well as concepts, and these are often attained from the human sciences to legitimise political objectives or perpetuate social norms. In this particular context, the chapter will consider factors such as the UK government’s reliance on advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), i) as a means to justify legislative orders such as the national lockdown(s), ii) to establish that the actions or policies of the government are founded in fact (i.e. by “following the science”), and iii) how narratives such as the notion of a “new normal” thinly disguise a range of pressing social matters such as poverty and depravation, inequality (in its myriad of guises), mass incarceration, oppressive policing and supervision, and the overwhelming fatalities that have typified the UK government’s response to the pandemic.

Returning to the methods at hand, this chapter aims to situate the above concerns using discourse analysis to identify how statements within the archive came into being, how they were mobilised, and the precise conditions through which they gained traction or credibility. With regards to this particular mode of analysis, one should observe the manner in which Foucault situates discourse historically in his work. Here, one can consider the use of discourse within Foucault’s archaeological method in texts such as *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The Order of Things* (1989) – specifically in relation to the use of these techniques as investigative tools. Kendall and Wickham summarise Foucault’s methods as follows:

Archaeology can be understood as Foucault's method; genealogy is not so much a method as a way of putting archaeology to work, a way of linking it to our present concerns. We might think of genealogy as the strategic development of archaeological research (1999: 31)

Therefore, in the context of this chapter, archaeological research will be employed in relation to past events (i.e.; looking at how pandemics have been historically managed, via Sarasin, 2020), and through genealogy to link these ideas to the present. The chapter will therefore serve as an excavation of statements from the public archive during the current pandemic. In terms of the application of this research, genealogy is not merely the process of putting archaeology to work in the present, but it is the means to analyse the ‘processual’, hence, the on-going nature of discourse (Foucault, 1981, 70-1). Indeed this is an important point to note, for the chapter will examine a corpus of material from the last twelve months a) as a means to determine which policies or actions arose at which points, b) in response to what particular part of the crisis, and c) as a contingency against which perceivable risks. What it is that links this body of evidence to the pandemic (and more importantly to how contemporary power is maintained over the population), are factors such as public health and welfare, security, and the economy - thus in Foucault’s work, the human sciences.

If the chapter was to fully engage with Foucault’s archaeological method, one would expect it to consider precisely how pandemics such as the devastating outbreak of Smallpox during the late-19th century, the Great Plague of London in the mid-17th century, or even the Black Death during the 14th century shaped the evolution of power throughout European history. While that would represent a fascinating study in its own right (see Sarasin, 2020, for example), the focal point for this chapter is to examine the manner in which discourse *per se* has been used to redefine normative social values in the current milieu. However, if modern society is comprised of different types of power, i.e. through a combination of governmental, disciplinary, and sovereign forms of rule (Foucault, 2007b, O’Neill, 1986, and Dean, 2010), historically speaking, previous pandemics would have been responded to in very different ways. Indeed, it is precisely because modern society is formed of a triangle of sovereignty, discipline and government that one should expect a multitude of approaches to be taken in the face of modern global pathogens (O’Neil, 1986: 52). Therefore, the response from the modern nation state should be comprised of an amalgamation of all three modes of engagement.

Indeed as Sarasin (2020) observes, ‘Foucault returned time and again to three infectious diseases and described the political response to them as models for three different forms of government: leprosy, plague, and smallpox’. Here, by way of the exclusion of lepers from society and the city walls, we can align sovereignty with leprosy for the simple reason that the object of the sovereign regime was the accumulation of territory and wealth (Foucault, 2008: 36-8). Any societal factors that posed a risk to accomplishing these objectives were merely eliminated or removed. With regards to the great plagues of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these particular outbreaks gave rise to the vast ‘disciplinary projects’ conducted throughout Europe, in which the population became the object of the state (Foucault, 1975: 195-9).

If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects. Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power. (*Ibid*: 198)

Foucault, therefore, examined the rise of disciplinary power during the early modern period in relation to the scientific basis for organising people (and of course, their ailments), via principles of regimentation, categorisation, supervision, entrainment, segregation and punishment, that typified life in and around the factories of the industrial revolution (*Ibid*). Such themes are of course paramount to his seminal work on the origin of modern hospitals and healthcare systems; the evolution of standing armies; the birth of the great social institutions of welfare and education; the development of modern penitentiary systems; and the precise conditions or reforms that were necessary for their introduction (see *Discipline and Punish*, 1975).

However, it was the outbreak of small pox during the late-19th century that caused Foucault to revisit his ideas on exclusion, confinement, and supervision. As considered by Kelly (2019) and Sarasin (2020), the shift in focus from disciplinary power to liberal power, from punishment to reform, and from control to utilisation, marks a turning point in Foucault’s later work.

The smallpox model of power is essentially based on power's abandonment of the dream to completely eradicate pathogens, intruders, germs, to surveil society "in depth," like in times of the plague, and to discipline the movement of all individuals. Instead, [governmental] power coexists with the pathogenic intruder, knows of its existence, collects data, compiles statistics, and wages "medical campaigns" that may very well take on the character of a normation and disciplinarization of individuals. But discipline, let alone comprehensive discipline, can no longer be a reasonable goal of liberal power. Only where it nevertheless pursues this, where power wants to return from the smallpox model to the plague model, it becomes authoritarian and eventually totalitarian. (Sarasin, 2020)

There are further considerations to be made with regards to the concepts and methodologies of Foucault’s work in comparison to the current pandemic. As indicated by Sarasin, the shift in emphasis from discipline to government (thus to liberal regimes of power and security), acknowledge the legitimacy and even the limits of authority. But at which points (and under what particular circumstances) does power make use of, employ, and mobilise discourse?

The above conceptualisation, posits the historical and conceptual basis for contingencies and various state responses to an outbreak on the scale of Covid-19. In precisely this sense, the chapter will consider popular discourse i) in the run up to lockdown, ii) during the first national lockdown in the UK, and iii) throughout its continuation. The working hypothesis is that at various points during the pandemic (especially as the situation has either worsened or improved), responses from the establishment have followed an identifiable pattern of caution-coercion-consequence, befitting the three different modes of government cited above. According to Foucault, ‘liberalism must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera’ (2008: 63-4). It is the discursive development and rationalisation of these fields, in which the chapter is most interested.

**From Security to Discipline**

Upon reflection, it could be claimed that the UK’s response to the pandemic was laconic, short-sighted, disparate, and even arrogant in terms of the initial reaction to the threat posed by this lethal global pathogen. With regards to the extreme loss of life it would cause (and disruption to society and the economy), the early downscaling of the threat by the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens from a ‘high consequence infectious disease’ on 19 March 2020 set a dangerous precedent in the popular imaginary - and determined how seriously the outbreak would be taken by the population (Public Health England, 2020). Although the above citation is often misquoted (deliberately so in this case),[[1]](#footnote-1) during the early stages of the UK’s fight against coronavirus, the level of risk was significantly downplayed and entirely misunderstood. The initial response from Whitehall established the pandemic as a cold or flu in public discourse, and the leitmotif of ‘catch it, kill it, bin it’, became the given front line of defence in government policy (*Coronavirus: Action Plan*, 2020: 14). The overall strategy of ‘Contain, Delay, Research, and Mitigate’, established coronavirus on a par with seasonal ‘coughs and sneezes’ (*Ibid*), and during early March, led to speculation in the media that the government had abandoned the containment phase of its campaign and was attempting to develop herd immunity instead (Boseley, 2020). Indeed just three weeks before the first national lockdown, Prime Minster Boris Johnson declared the "best single piece of advice we can give" is to "wash your hands for 20 seconds or more", thereby demonstrating great British resolve in the face of adversary (BBC, 2020). One could posit that this approach to managing the pandemic framed covid-19 as nothing out of the ordinary, and the usual sanitary precautions (thus normal security measures), would prevail. At this particular time, 4829 deaths had been recorded in China alone (Thomala, 2021).

Notwithstanding the escalating fatalities seen throughout the world by late-February, the majority of Western nations failed to take decisive action until March 2020, with many European states closing their borders shortly thereafter. In the UK, the Government’s main line of response focussed on an initial containment strategy in which stricter border controls and a rudimentary track and trace system had been proposed to prevent the virus from spreading throughout the population (*Coronavirus: Action Plan*, 2020: 10).[[2]](#footnote-2) The government’s plan acknowledged the need to defer to expert scientific and medical advice, for which it defaulted to Public Health England (PHE), the UK’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and the World Health organisation (WHO). The government’s stated policy was to “follow the science” and develop its response around this triumvirate of expertise as the situation evolved, thus typifying the ‘processual’ nature of discourse (Foucault, 1981, 70-1). In terms of security (and securitization), the phased stages of Contain, Delay, Research and Mitigate situate the establishment’s response to the pandemic within a risk aversion framework – typical of contingency planning techniques (Lyon, 2007, Price, 2011, and Harbisher, 2015). The introduction of non-government institutions, frames initial attempts to mitigate the risk as a governmental response to the pandemic in so far as in modern society there are a range of different security apparatuses that function in a state-like manner (Dean, 2010). In relation to advice given to the general public, the *Coronavirus: Action Plan* made two recommendations. The first of these was to ask all members of the population to be vigilant and to follow public health authorities’ advice, ‘for example on hand washing’ (*Coronavirus: Action Plan*, 2020: 16). The second was a plea from government to rely on trusted sources for essential information only, thereby ‘reducing the impact and spread of misinformation’ (*Ibid:* 10).

During the early stages of contagion, several bizarre theories about the origin of the virus had been circulating on social media for a number of weeks, including claims that the pandemic was a government conspiracy; that it was a hoax; that it was some form of biblical plague or epidemic; or that it was being spread by 5G telecommunication towers (Cuthbertson and Duncan, 2020). Tabloid newspapers speculated wildly about the causes of the pandemic, by running exposés on “squalid” retail environments such as the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan[[3]](#footnote-3) and the consumption of wild animals therein (Mullin, 2020). Here, it was alleged that the ingestion of local delicacies was directly responsible for the outbreak, in so far as contaminated wild meat was thought to be the main source of infection. Tabloid newspapers were quick to take this hysteria to print, running stories in the UK on the depraved dining habits of Wuhan citizens. In one report for *The Mirror*, Lila Randall (2020) provided coverage of ‘a Chinese couple eating whole bats in a fancy restaurant’. At the time it was thought that the virus had come from one these infected mammals, as similar pathogens had been found in the Chiroptera family before. Here, Randall presented footage of a ‘woman holding the bat with enormous chopsticks and nibbling on its wings’ in a primitive spectacle of Asian cuisine. The article further claimed that ‘bat soup is a delicacy in the country and a popular dish in Wuhan, where the virus originated’ (*Ibid*), thus perpetuating the kind of ‘orientalist’ narratives that have dominated Western news discourse since the outbreak began (Said, 1981). Whereas *The Sun* (Mullin, 2020) redacted its bat soup story just a few days after its release, other newspapers ran variations of the theme, turning to similar “wet markets” throughout South East Asia with a mixture of suspicion and fear, and similarly blaming the trade in endangered species for the pandemic. Famous wildlife markets in Indonesia made easy targets for journalists, who revealed to the world that the culinary trade in bats, dogs, and other mammals continued – calling for an immediate end to this barbaric tradition (Paddock and Sijabat, 2020). Other members of the animal kingdom were also suspected of being carriers for the virus, thereby casting further condemnation towards Chinese herbal medicine and the illegal trade in pangolin scales (Cooney, 2020).

What quickly became apparent to UK authorities was that reducing the impact and spread of disinformation needed to be prioritised early on, thus to ensure a clear and consistent message was being communicated to the population (*Coronavirus: Action Plan*, 2020: 16). In the first instance, this would be achieved by making mainstream news organisations, the BBC in particular,[[4]](#footnote-4) run campaigns to help differentiate fake news from fact. Across the sector, news media would be regulated by OFCOM in terms policing ‘harmful but legal’ content, but locally, the BBC would have its own team of specialists working on this agenda (Culture, Media and Sport – Select Committee, 2020). The government also planned to make Social Media firms responsible for the content posted by their users, encouraging such forums to be moderated more effectively (*Ibid*). As an overall security strategy, government communications themselves, needed to have greater reach and impact. This would be achieved through shrewd marketing and advertising campaigns situated across different forms of media. Finally, in terms of wider government initiatives, a Rapid Response Unit was also established under the UK’s re-commissioned Counter Disinformation Unit in early March.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Rapid Response Unit was appointed to identify “outbreaks” of fake news, and to discredit them as quickly as possible.

Then, on 23 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made an address to the population in which the first national lockdown was announced. The legal order, made under the *Coronavirus Act 2000* required all citizens to stay at home until further notice, to contain the spread of transmission and infection (Johnson, 2020). The emergency order was transmitted across all broadcast and telecommunication networks including SMS text messages sent to individual handsets by providers. The Prime Minister stated, ‘from this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction - you must stay at home’ (*Ibid*). In terms of discourse, the *Coronavirus Act 2000* depicted the pandemic as a state emergency and legitimised the first national lockdown in the UK. It provided authorities with new powers to manage public conduct; remove from public spaces anyone they perceived as being infected and detain them where necessary; to order members of the public to return to their homes; to close schools and businesses for an undisclosed period of time; and to place a ban on all public gatherings. It did, in hindsight reframe the government’s approach to the pandemic from one of security to one of discipline.

**Establishing the New Normal**

During the first two weeks of lockdown in the UK, the nation was noticeably subdued with fewer vehicles on Britain’s roads, far less people on the streets, or in the limited number of stores that were still allowed to trade. The overall preference was wherever practical, to shop online and have home deliveries made by supermarkets or other retailers. Those who did venture outside, did so cautiously, and were adorned with face masks, surgical gloves, and disinfectant hand gel. According to Sandman and Lanard, two authors for *Perspectives in Health* (a regional publication for the World Health Organisation), essential lessons had been learned from the outbreak of H5N1 avian virus (bird flu) in 2005. In terms of mitigating the impact and social cost of future pandemics, they considered the essential role played by communications in shaping public attitudes and behaviour. For Sandman and Lanard, essential communications needed to follow several key stages with regards to normalisation and adjustment. It was determined here, that:

Once people get past their apathy and start taking a new risk seriously, the normal response is an "adjustment reaction"—a temporary fearfulness, sometimes accompanied by misplaced or excessive caution. This is the teachable moment. Don't ignore it or ridicule it; guide it. Then we settle into the "new normal". (Sandman and Lanard, 2005)

The notion of a new normal is therefore synonymous with pandemics both by way of concepts and practices. In Foucauldian terms, this posits the new normal as a discourse that is firmly couched in a number of scientific and medical disciplines regarding health, security, welfare, politics and the economy. In this particular case, the essential ‘norm’ being pitched by the government was to stay at home and avoid the spread of infection (Foucault, 2007b: 57). In terms of normative values, during the national lockdown it was illegal to be outside without a legitimate reason (without which one would be fined), and being outside increased the risk of infection (leading to hospitalisation and death).

The new normal for this particular pandemic, was one in which citizens came to accept a rising mortality rate as the UK edged toward its first peak of infections. The limited commercial spaces that remained open had already witnessed panic buying on a national scale, with supplies of essential goods (canned and dried foods, flour, and toilet paper) out of stock in many supermarkets, or being rationed to three of a kind per customer in others. As one of the few essential retailers allowed to remain open, supermarkets imposed strict in-store policies including one way systems and two-metre social-distancing rules. Aisles were carefully separated with customers being directed around stores by marshals. Queues to access these stores often tailed back around the block, or across entire supermarket car parks. Some members of society (key workers and the elderly) were given access to stores at specific times of the day to avoid mixing with others. Certain areas therein were closed for business, such as clothing concessions and mobile phone franchises. Further attributes of the new normal included furloughs for non-essential workers (i.e. those not in the emergency services, vital public sector employees, healthcare professionals or teachers), with members of other industries expected to work from home. In terms of recreational activities, citizens were only permitted to leave home once a day for exercise and only within the immediate vicinity. The mixing of different households was strictly prohibited by law. Those with existing medical conditions were written to by local health authorities, and told to stay indoors for a period of three months (or more) in self-isolation. In sum, the new normal moved the narrative of the pandemic from security to discipline.

According to Asonye (2020) the notion of a new normal is cathartic, for the term enables citizens to renegotiate their comprehension of revised social roles, familial and workplace relations through conditions imposed under the pandemic:

The language of a 'new normal' is being deployed almost as a way to quell any uncertainty ushered in by the coronavirus. With no cure in sight, everyone from politicians and the media to friends and family has perpetuated this rhetoric as they imagine settling into life under this 'new normal' […] This framing is inviting: it contends that things will never be the same as they were before — so welcome to a new world order. By using this language, we reimagine where we were previously relative to where we are now, appropriating our present as the standard.

As with Asonye’s considerations, practices such as working from home, furlough schemes, social distancing, shielding, and self-isolation are terms that have become synonymous with the pandemic. Although there are legal grounds for citizens to obey some of the restrictions in place, many of the criteria rely on common sense, on pressure from other members of society, or as a means to access vital goods or services in retail environments. The notion of social distancing has become especially entrenched in public behaviour during the last twelve months. It is a technique of government that relies in the first instance on the obedience of the subject and thereafter, on pressure from others.

Social distancing can, therefore, be considered a disciplinary technique in so far as the limited public spaces one is allowed to visit are regimented, controlled, and supervised - either by officials, or by other ‘judges of normality’ (Foucault, 1975, 304). It functions as discourse because it links specific orders or norms to anticipated forms of conduct. There is a fine line, however, between positing social distancing as a liberal technique of government, and entrainment. As considered by Sarasin (2020):

The call to observe rules of "social distancing" belongs without doubt in the sphere of liberal techniques of government, which are fundamentally based on individual freedom and must respect this freedom.

Yet, in the current milieu, social distancing has far more in common with discipline than it shares with personal freedom. Indeed where social distancing measures are enshrined in public policy or law, they move beyond the sphere of liberal techniques of government (even if it remains an individual’s choice to obey said laws or to disobey the rules). Furthermore, by way of hierarchical observation, examination and normalizing judgements, the use of social distancing in public places is a regulated activity (Foucault, 1975: 170-194). It thus ceases to be a liberal technique when it becomes an obligation.

**Oh No, Not You Again? Entrainment, Advertising, and Discipline**

With regards to promoting the new normal, the previous section of this chapter sought to establish a number of core principles that constitute the particular values of a brand, and thus identify what it represents. The reason for this segue into contemporary advertising and marketing techniques, is precisely because as a self-proclaimed science that deals with data sets and statistics, the spurious concept of branding offers far more in relation to modern politics than one might expect. Undoubtedly political parties are brands; they have designated values and are marketed via measurable election campaigns to sell their wares. In recent years the rise of social media and influencer culture has had an equivalent impact on the manner in which audiences consume different types of media and the strategies behind how best to pitch certain products to gain the most exposure and sales. The proliferation of social media has had a considerable impact on how political parties nowadays communicate to voters. These online environments provide ample opportunities for measuring audience reach, virtual footfall, and for assessing participation via “hits”, “mentions”, and “likes”. Furthermore, sophisticated artificial intelligence (Ai) modelling, now provides feedback on the likelihood of success for campaign actions. The integration of complex algorithms, Ai modelling, and politics, has been identified by Westgarth (2020) via the term ‘algoracy’, as a way to describe the use of predictability modelling to shape modern politics and to manage public relations campaigns. Coupled to the recent trend in politics for employing behavioural science to generate positive responses to public policy (thus, bring about compliance), Ai modelling represents a powerful combination of algorithmic forecasting and psychology that informs how best to communicate difficult decisions to audiences, and how through the use of behavioural insights, audiences can be persuaded to make favourable decisions about their lives. Relating these concerns back to the matter at hand, all such techniques have found a place in the messages and policies disseminated by the UK government during the pandemic. If indeed the new normal constitutes a brand, then one should ask how this is being marketed, and by whom.

During the early stages of the pandemic, the UK government identified the need for clarity in its communications strategy, to appropriate virtual spaces on social media and reduce contrary or counter-productive content (Culture, Media and Sport – Select Committee, 2020). At the very least it aimed to ensure that fundamental messages would be prioritised across different media, and that news organisations would distribute this content accordingly. To improve public awareness of the pandemic, it returned to several techniques used previously to generate support for the 2016 campaign to leave the European Union. The success of the Brexit referendum (depending on how one voted) was largely attributed to the use of behavioural psychology via the government’s Behavioural Insights Team (Orrell, 2020), and to creative entrepreneur Ben Guerin, amongst others. Guerin, a twenty-four year old New Zealander, and founder of Topham Guerin creative agency, was a social media strategist, and had already worked for a number of international governments on election campaigns. The UK government also enlisted the services of Faculty (an Ai modelling company) with whom it had also worked on Vote Leave. As Geoghegan has recently observed, both Topham Guerin and Faculty received emergency contracts during the early stages of the pandemic to help develop government communications strategy:

Topham Guerin is the latest Conservative Party-linked company known to have received contracts from the government under the emergency procurement rules. […] Others include Faculty – an AI company that worked for the prime minister’s chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, on the Vote Leave campaign in 2016 – and Public First, a policy and research firm owned by two long-term associates of both Cummings and the Cabinet Office minister, Michael Gove. (Geoghegan, *et al*, 2020)

Faculty therefore provided the means for analysing the anticipated reception and success of various government messages about the pandemic, whereas Guerin was recruited to consult on its delivery via social media and conventional advertising. The content being mobilised was informed by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and the Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B, a subdivision of SAGE). The BIT, partly owned by the Cabinet Office, was responsible for developing behavioural solutions associated with reducing the spread of coronavirus; including frequent hand washing, and trying to stop people from touching their faces ‘about 15 times an hour’ (BI, 2020). The Behavioural Insights Team had substantial experience of developing strategies to influence public conduct both in the UK and abroad, primarily to increase public spending and compliance with various government policies. The Behavioural Insights Team (or Nudge Unit, as it was informally known) worked on numerous programmes to influence the behaviour of voters, and to sway popular opinion. The SPI-B on the other hand, was asked to examine topics such as ‘the risk of public disorder; the use of behavioural and social interventions; and how to give guidance to people who are asked to self-isolate’ (GovUK, 2020). This section of the chapter therefore examines the use of nudge theory and advertising techniques, as the means through which public conduct has been influenced during the pandemic.

In 2008, Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein published their seminal work on behavioural science entitled *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, in response to the growing domestic and military interest being show in the use of psychology to influence human action. The authors proposed two alternative scenarios in which (from a libertarian perspective) it was proposed that conscious social actors should have the right to make decisions regarding key aspects of their lives, and whether good or bad, should independently make such choices. A paternalistic model employing behavioural science was comparatively offered, in which private or public sector agencies could legitimately influence the decisions of consumers and citizens, ‘to make their lives, longer, healthier, and better’ (2008: 5).[[6]](#footnote-6) Thaler and Sunstein’s proposition followed the belief that by using appropriate ‘choice architecture’ social actors could be nudged (coerced) towards making decisions to their ultimate benefit. At its most simplistic level, they claimed, ‘putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge [whereas] banning junk food does not’ (*Ibid*: 6). Supermarket psychology notwithstanding, the subtle yet deliberate placement of objects, ideas, or activities within the public domain has a very real impact on how citizens conduct their lives, and the use of nudges during the pandemic forms part of the discourse of the new normal.

There is good evidence to suggest that the application of choice architecture and nudges have been used to sway public opinion on political matters during the last decade. Sunstein for one was appointed Administrator for the Office of Administration and Regulatory Affairs at the Whitehouse during Barack Obama’s Presidency and laid the foundation for many of the techniques in use today. In the UK, after the resignation of Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2010 and the failure of a general election to secure a new British Government, the resulting hung parliament led to a coalition between Conservative and Liberal Democrats led by David Cameron and Nick Clegg. David Cameron thereafter established the first official Nudge Unit to become active in Western Politics under the auspices of the Behavioural Insight Team (BIT), and later claimed an overall victory for an unpopular Conservative government. Following the successful application of nudge theory in domestic matters (such as increasing revenue from vehicle taxation and encouraging people to join the organ donor register), the Nudge Unit was commissioned by a number of overseas states and consulted on U.S. communication strategies. It was determined that Behavioural Science worked best only in certain offices (communications) and with regards to particular activities (revenue and public welfare).

Coupled then, with the reach and administrative capacity of social media, and the use of success modelling via Ai, nudges have become a very potent catalyst during the pandemic for promoting behavioural change. Nudge theory has therefore become prominent for establishing certain practices and beliefs and for mobilising them by way of normative discourse. It frames a particular set of ideas as being acceptable within a given social context, posits them as being economically or individually beneficial, and therefore establishes them as norms. The leitmotif of “Hands, Face, Space” which adorns political broadcasts in the UK, serves to normalise “good” hygienic behaviour, just as the Prime Minister’s use of singing two verses of “Happy Birthday” whilst washing hands equates to around twenty seconds of thorough cleansing. Indeed, this represents the use of discourse for the purposes of entrainment, regimentation, and control, thus, the ‘disciplinarization of individuals’ (Sarasin, 2020). By way of exploring choice architecture in the context of the pandemic, billboards and posters that inform people of the risks posed by coronavirus are situated in the liberal domain of nudge theory in so far as they propose an ideal choice to consumers or the population (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008: 5). The paternalistic model offered by Thaler and Sunstein would simply remove that choice via laws, curfews, and policing – as witnessed at various points during the lockdown.

In terms of situating this argument first in the context of liberal choice architecture, some of the most successful nudge campaigns seen during the pandemic consisted of simple, yet stark messages, produced under guidance by Topham Guerin. Adorned with the familiar triptych of “Stay Home – Protect the NHS – Save Lives”, advertisements such as ‘IF YOU GO OUT, YOU CAN SPREAD IT, PEOPLE WILL DIE’ started to appear just one week after the first lockdown was announced (Waterson, 2020). As with similar adverts released via Facebook, Twitter, and in newspapers, the campaign adopted a ‘far stronger tone than any produced by the Government before, using striking red and yellow colouring and featuring dramatic images of NHS staff in face masks and other protective wear’ (Press Association 2021, 2020). Further iterations of the campaign featuring the same artwork, delivered additional messages such as ‘ACT LIKE YOU’VE GOT IT, ANYONE CAN SPREAD IT (*Ibid*). The initial ‘teachable moment’ was thereby guided by such campaigns in their capacity to prey on the fear and vulnerability of citizens during the first week of lockdown (Sandman and Lanard, 2005). This is how the new normal was gradually established.

There were of course, instances in which stronger paternalistic nudges were used during the course of the pandemic. With regards to the aforementioned social distancing measures implemented in British supermarkets, the implementation of strict one-way systems in aisles, the use of marshals on shops floors, and the use of yellow and black hazard tape to denote the 2 meter rule throughout, are all examples of behavioural science in use. All such practices, signifiers and signs, belong firmly to the domain of the new normal, as normative discourse. Indeed according to Mills (*The Conversation*, 2020), even Thaler himself argued the case for using nudge theory as a means to fight the pandemic:

Using some behavioural science to help tackle the coronavirus pandemic may make sense, as Thaler has recently argued. For instance, Danish supermarkets have started using floor signs at check-outs to encourage customers to maintain a safe distance while purchasing groceries.

Nonetheless, a few weeks into the national lockdown after the initial ‘period of adjustment’ started to subside, Out Of Home (OOH) advertising campaigns adopted a very different approach to maintaining appropriate social conduct (Sandman and Lanard, 2005). Placed in bold white copy against a black background for contrast in prominent public spaces, campaigns such as ‘OH NO, NOT YOU AGAIN: UNLESS YOUR JOURNEY IS ESSENTIAL STAY HOME’, and ‘WHO INVITED YOU?’ perpetuate expectations of social distancing (Haynes, 2020). The stated familiarly of the messages, referring to citizens as “you” and “you’re”, as in ‘ARE YOU STILL HERE?’, serves to humiliate the reader and normalise their conduct. The narrative therefore moves further towards discipline in suggesting that the individual is being watched and that they should feel shame for being outdoors.

In terms of normativity, the question therefore becomes, what is the norm, and what is considered normal or abnormal? According to the above campaigns, it is normal to stay at home as directed by the government. Under certain conditions, one can venture outside to go to work (in certain professions only), or to shop as infrequently as possible for essential items. But strict rules must be observed. If you go outside too much, you are at risk of being infected or of being scrutinised, for ‘the judges of normality are present everywhere’ (Foucault, 1975, 304). The norm is thereby represented by way of the given rules, the normal by virtue of acquiescence to the rules, and the abnormal in terms of deviation or rejection of them, thus disobedience.

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm. In other words, it is not the normal and the abnormal that is fundamental and primary in disciplinary normalization, it is the norm. That is, there is an originally prescriptive character of the norm and the determination and the identification of the normal and the abnormal becomes possible in relation to this posited norm. (Michel Foucault, Security, Territory, Population [2004] (2007b), 58.)

If, as Foucault suggests, within this disciplinary milieu, norms are comprised of optimal models (predicated by those of obedience and deviation), one should examine how the new normal posits and frames such archetypes.

According to the Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B), societal risks from civil disobedience were considered unlikely during the early stages of the pandemic. However, the Government was advised to promote positive social action wherever possible in its communications. Here, the SPI-B stated that ‘acts of altruism will likely predominate and the Government could promote and guide these’ (GovUK, 2020). In the UK, the Clapping for Carers phenomenon (circa 26 March to 28 May 2020), typified the sort of altruism posited as the ideal. Under social distancing restrictions caused by the first national lockdown, citizens were encouraged to stand on their doorsteps every Thursday night at 8pm and show their appreciation for key workers such as NHS employees by clapping or banging cooking pans (Clap for our Carers, 2021). For many this was the only, very limited form of social interaction they would have – especially if individual households were shielding. The movement gained popularity as gesture of solidarity, and was rapidly embraced by the Prime Minister and other senior politicians as a normative ritual. Other forms of normative discourse that reiterated the positive included celebrating the 75 year anniversary of the Second-World War, by hanging home-made bunting outside of people’s homes in place of the planned celebrations of street parties (Chandler-Wilde, 2020), and the notable achievements of Captain Sir Tom Moore a war veteran who raised over £39 million for the NHS by walking up and down his garden at the age of 99 (Captain Tom, 2021).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The antithesis of this collective venerable effort (often shrouded in nostalgic wartime rhetoric)[[8]](#footnote-8) was in popular usage at least, terms such as “rule-breakers”, “flouters”, and “covidiots” – the latter a portmanteau of covid and idiot. Indeed all of the above were defamatory terms used to discredit anyone who failed to adhere to public health or safety guidelines; those who deliberately broke the rules; stockpiled essential goods or items (thus denying neighbours from having them); refused to acknowledge the pandemic; or behaved in an unconscionable or anti-social way. With regards to the mobilisation of such terms, local authorities in Barry-Island, Wales, were reputed to have placed posters on public bins at this popular seaside resort prior to the April Bank Holiday. The posters announced ‘If You’re Reading This You Are a Covidiot Go Home’ in an attempt to reduce the number of tourists (Sky News, 2020). In another incident on social media, an attention-seeking individual was filmed licking the shelves in an American supermarket presumably to generate interest in his online brand and develop his audience reach. The news was picked up by mainstream media, with tabloid pundits such as Piers Morgan ready to spout vitriol at the man:

'You know what I'd like to happen to him? I'd like him found, and I'm sure they'll get him, put in prison immediately and then I'd like him deprived of any health care should be then get the virus having deliberately tried to give it, potentially, to lots of other people. […] 'That might concentrate the minds of these morons. And it might concentrate the minds of these morons here too.' (Andrews, 2020)

To return to an earlier point regarding the disciplinary proposition of the new normal, as circumstances deteriorated in the UK (into April and beyond), the binary division between the normal and abnormal (or appropriate and inappropriate forms of conduct), exponentially increased. What was revealed by this process was an increase in conservative attitudes (as outlined above) and the gradual appearance of state racism. However, as outlined by Foucault, this particular form of discrimination, eventually comes to focus less on the differences between one group and another, and seeks to establish ‘a global strategy of social conservatisms’ (1997: 62). In this respect, state racism is a discriminatory practice that society directs ‘against its own elements and its own products’ to become one of the ‘basic dimensions of social normalization’ (*Ibid*).

**The Means of Coercion**

For the better part of it, HM Constabulary adapted well to the challenges posed by three national lockdowns in the UK, despite the alleged lack of clarity around intervention and enforcement polices offered by government. In large areas of conurbation such as London, the pronounced visibility of the metropolitan police service was a reassuring sight for many - although the various approaches taken to “policing by consent” was also stretched to the limit in other regions of the UK. During three separate lockdowns, police maintained the initial strategy of challenging the legitimacy of people’s presence in public places and issuing fines wherever necessary. Here, the given approach was to ‘Engage’ citizens, ‘Explain’ the rules, ‘Encourage’ compliance, and where necessary, ‘Enforce’ the law (Police.uk, 2020). Undoubtedly, the British public also tested police resolve with regards to its own interpretation of the rules, often citing disproportionate or aggressive policing measures for any altercations. However, having settled society into its new normal, normalcy thereafter needed to be maintained.

At this point it is worth returning to Sarasin’s comparative study of coronavirus, and to Foucault’s obsession with pandemics as a means to comprehend power. Here, Sarasin observes the different historical responses to threats such as smallpox, leprosy, and the great plague. He notes, that when the accompanying model of organisation and governance used during the outbreak of smallpox in the late-nineteenth century attempts to return to the plague model of discipline, it risks becoming ‘authoritarian and eventually totalitarian’ (Sarasin, 2020). The conventional model to this, is one in which modern society ‘collects data, compiles statistics, and wages "medical campaigns”’ on the intruder (*Ibid*). One can align the UK’s preliminary response to coronavirus by way of risk aversion and securitisation as per the above, in so far as knowledge of the pathogen improves society’s resilience against it. It can therefore, be put to work of a sort. Contrary to this perspective, during the great plague, society aimed to eradicate the disease in its entirety, and set about sorting the infected from the healthy, thereby aiming to isolate and then treat the contagion. The resulting campaign involved attempts to ‘discipline the movement of all individuals’ – not unlike the measures employed during three national lockdowns in the UK (*Ibid*). The final model proposed by Sarasin and Foucault depicts the response of the sovereign regime to the pandemic, in which absolute exclusion is the optimal model of control. This could be construed as the removal of the pathogen (or those carrying it) from society. In sum, this part of the chapter aims to consider precisely how far towards the authoritarian model of control society has ventured during the outbreak, assuming by the time of print, the situation has not worsened and those who maintain order have not resorted more extreme measures. For in liberal society there are always underlying threats, of ‘limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations’, and the final contingency of state violence is always held in reserve (Foucault, 2008: 63-4).

On 23March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the first national lockdown in the UK. Under conditions imposed by the *Coronavirus Act 2020*, there would only be limited reasons for the general population to be allowed out in public. The restrictions to people’s activities included:

Shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible, one form of exercise a day - for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household, any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person; and travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home. (Johnson, 2020)

All social gatherings and mixing with other households was banned forthwith. The Prime Minister followed this announcement by informing the population ‘if you don’t follow the rules the police will have the powers to enforce them, including through fines and dispersing gatherings’ (*Ibid*). The following day, a monumental effort began in terms of promoting compliance and conducting enforcement activities where necessary. During the first week of lockdown, the government established its new mode of conduct via carefully placed and strategically managed out-of-home advertising campaigns. Assigned to pre-determined public spaces and released simultaneously on social media, the campaigns had a positive and measureable impact on footfall in public places (Copley, 2020). Using a range of metrics to determine a) the probability of success, and b), the most effective tone through which to generate the greatest impact, organisations such as Topham Guerin and Faculty Ai, helped establish the parameters of the new normal. After establishing appropriate public conduct under this revised social paradigm, comparative campaigns were launched by police to enforce and regulate them.

Again, in terms of audience reach, the promotion of law enforcement activities on social media (especially by police), has been used as a benchmark to identify, categorise, and shame rule-breakers, who were putting people’s lives at risk. Because newsworthy stories are picked from social media on a regular basis by journalists, posts on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook received further dissemination by the press. In some cases, police actions were considered antagonistic and overbearing, whereas in other instances,[[9]](#footnote-9) enforcement activities mobilised popular support for the policing of deviants. In terms of ‘social normalization’ under the binary of normal and abnormal behaviour, the promotion of various police initiatives served two purposes (Foucault, 1997: 62). On the one hand, it reminded citizens that their actions were being closely monitored, and on the other, it warned of the repercussions of deviating from the norm. Indeed, just two days into the lockdown, Derbyshire police instigated a Twitter campaign to deter citizens in Sheffield from travelling forty-minutes to the Peak District for exercise. According to *The Examiner*, police left ‘angry’ handwritten notes on the windscreen of cars reminding walkers to ‘stay home’ (Hoe, 2020). In terms of public discourse this moves the policing narrative of ‘limitations [and] controls’, into the territory of managing conduct by citing ‘obligations’ (Foucault, 2008: 63-4).

With regards to another key moment for establishing the new normal, only three days into the first lockdown, *The Guardian* as with other mainstream news agencies, covered the Twitter feed of Derbyshire Police for the second day running (Pidd and Dodd, 2020). Here, officers had used a drone to film members of the public walking dogs along Curbar Edge (a popular beauty spot in the Peak District). Whereas some of the parked cars were again from Sheffield (identified using license plate recognition cameras), others were from the local vicinity and the occupants were going about their lawful business by taking exercise close to home. According to *The Guardian*, Police had threatened to set up undisclosed roadblocks throughout the county, and their locations would not be announced to deter travellers from visiting the area (*Ibid*). Indeed the reliance upon threats and obligations posted by police on social media, served as a means to enforce compliance and dominated the early stages of the new normal. In disciplinary terms, the purpose of this campaign was to establish an appropriate code of conduct and to render alternative/former public behaviour as abnormal (Foucault, 1975: 190-195). The notion of shaming alleged misconduct and reframing this as delinquency further enforces the binary division between good/bad, deviant/law-abiding, and citizens/rule-breakers to establish and perpetuate this norm (*Ibid*: 199). Moreover, it moves the narrative of policing firmly towards social normalization and state racism (Foucault, 1997: 62).

During the first month of lockdown, this pattern of behaviour was repeated several times across the UK by police, who cited the lack of clarity into the scope and extent of police powers as the reason for these officious tactics. Further clarity, however, from the college of policing (and government) failed to have a significant impact on police conduct. In April 2020, Nick Adderley, the chief constable for Northamptonshire, accused local consumers of not shopping for essentials. The suspicion was that despite lockdown measures, citizens had decided to undertake home improvements, and were buying items such as houseplants and other decorative items that did not constitute essential sustenance or necessary home repairs. As observed by *The* *Sunday Times*, ‘officers in Northamptonshire were only “a few days away” […] from starting to rifle through people’s shopping to check whether they were buying basic necessities’ (Simpson, *et al*, 2020). Naturally, this precipitated a backlash of public complaints, upheld by Home Secretary Priti Patel, who insisted that police must follow the guidelines specified by government (*Ibid*). Nonetheless, HM Constabulary continued with a wide-ranging campaign across the UK to reiterate and normalise appropriate public conduct.[[10]](#footnote-10) In a further incident, Warrington Police were also accused of using excessive measures and undermining public confidence after issuing fines to ‘multiple people from the same household going to the shops for non-essential items’ (Warrington Police, 2020). At the end of May 2020, Derbyshire police had taken extreme measures to deter sightseers from visiting a local quarry known for its picturesque blue waters by using black dye ‘to make the water look less appealing’ (Somerville, 2020). A month later, in addition to the above attempts to deter visitors, local farmers covered the area with liquid slurry to render the area uninhabitable for tourists (Henderson, 2020).

In terms of physical coercion and actual law enforcement, under the *Coronavirus Act 2020*, police were (and still are) permitted to fine to anyone caught in public without a good reason. In one of the first reported cases of enforcement under the new measures, Marie Dinou from York, was fined £850 for travelling to Newcastle after failing to give officers ‘a valid reason for using the railway during the Coronavirus pandemic’ (Hartley-Parkinson, 2020). Police also raided a number of public gatherings including barbeques and house parties, despite the national order to stay at home. In Coventry not long after lockdown measures were announced, police discovered a barbeque hosting twenty people - including children. When the crowd refused to disperse, officers tipped the barbeque over to bring about an end to the party, publicising the action with hastags of ‘#RIPBBQ’ on social media (Foleshill Police, 2020). In April 2020, several regional divisions also made requests for citizens to inform on neighbours who were flouting the rules. Cambridgeshire Police for one had developed an online pro forma for informers to use to notify police of potential coronavirus breeches (as observed by Mills, for the *Metro* newspaper, 2020). Initial guidelines for using the form were vague, prompting local citizens to ask what would actually constitute an offense.

Others claimed the move was ‘Orwellian’ with one writing: ‘This will largely encourage neighbours to curtain twitch and grass George and Mildred at #77 up for daring leave home for exercise or shopping… Turning friends to foes.’ (*Ibid*)

In terms of ‘directing society against its own elements’ (Foucault, 1997: 62), government support for the campaign was clearly evident, with the Minister for Crime (Kit Malthous), reiterating the call for support in September 2020 following renewed restrictions on public gatherings after the initial lockdown ended (BBC, 2020b). As a form of political control, the notion of turning ordinary citizens into spies to inform on their neighbours runs dangerously close to establishing a new society, predicated on supervision and oversight. Indeed as of 28 June 2020, over 18,400 fines had been issued under the *Coronavirus Act* in the UK, and that number is still rising (Dearden, 2020a).

However, what has been even more alarming to observe during the past twelve months, has been the turn towards policing public discourse in cyberspace, via the regulation of information on social media. Here, beyond representing a series of entertainment platforms, social media has become a powerful tool for monitoring and controlling popular opinion, for nudging citizens toward compliance, and potentially restricting the right to freedom of speech. As a result of early interventions during the pandemic, (and evident calls to remove dangerous misinformation from circulation) members of the conspiracy fringe have been removed from social media. David Ike, for one, generally known for claims ‘that the world is run by reptiles and the royal family are lizards’ was unceremoniously removed from YouTube and Facebook, for promoting stories that linked coronavirus to 5G telecommunications masts, for making anti-Semitic remarks, and for spreading false information about the communicability of the disease (Dearden, 2020b). However, while the musings of figures such as Ike border on the incredulous, the recognition of social media as a very powerful communications platform by the establishment does not. According to the Centre for Countering Digital Hate, Ike’s posts claiming the coronavirus is a hoax, had ‘been viewed at least 30 million times’ before his profiles were deleted (*Ibid*). The closure of his accounts had been made in response to ‘Doctors, MPs and counter-extremism campaigners’ calling on social media firms to stop the ‘racism and misinformation about Covid-19 to millions of people’ being spread by Ike (*Ibid*). Of course, while such content in inexcusable in modern society, the political appropriation of social media represents a significant concern for any nation that considerers itself a democracy.

Under the present circumstances, one could posit that the internet has become the ultimate tool of social control (Kyriakopoulou, 2011), not in relation to the justifiable deletion of accounts belonging to the lunatic fringe, but in response to the use of social media and other platforms to promote state narratives regarding the virus, and the wholesale deletion of contrary perspectives. The promotion of news stories denouncing disinformation and conspiracy theories, quite arguably deserves greater attention than has been offered here. However, in relation to the chapter’s emphasis on behavioural science and normativity, the condemnation of fake news and the reframing of dissenting popular discourse (as being conspiratorial or anti-social), serve as essential coercive mechanisms to the new normal. Indeed during the last twelve months it would have been counter-productive to close social media or to police it entirely. As Gayo-Avello (2015) observes, ‘authoritarian regimes prefer their citizens to exercise self-control when using social media rather than fully controlling it’. It is for this particular reason that examples are being made to highlight deviations from the norm.

In this particular respect, the most significant deviants are currently identified by way of covid-deniers, who despite over 100,000 deaths in the UK, have largely adhered to the belief that the virus is a hoax. Over the last twelve months, the worldwide spread of groups aiming to cast doubt over the existence of the pandemic, has seen numerous incursions in hospital wards (in which deniers claim to have filmed empty intensive care units), and more alarmingly, one incident in which advocates attempted to liberate a patient from medical care (France, 2021). Arguably, justifiable concerns cite the spread of such beliefs among audiences who may not comprehend the danger posed by the virus, thus representing a severe threat to society by virtue of their actions. In the former instance, police attended a Gloucester address in December 2020 and arrested a young woman for filming illegally in a hospital and claiming its wards were all empty (Robinson, 2020). Twenty-four hours after releasing the footage on Facebook, police visited the home of Debbie Hicks to make an arrest under the *Public Order Act*. The eight-minute film made claims that the Gloucester infirmary was empty and was viewed by over 158,000 people prior to being taken offline (*Ibid*). It is not exclusively a question of freedom of speech then, for such posts are still being made on social media (even if they are removed shortly thereafter). But the above actions do highlight questions of proportionality, design, and purpose of the response by authorities. Indeed it would seem that the British establishment is fighting coronavirus on a number of very different fronts.

**Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter and outline further areas of research, there are a number of organisations that have appeared during the last twelve months to regulate social media whose *modus operandi* and activities require attention. Operating under the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) for example, is the Counter Disinformation Unit that examines the wider gamut of misinformation and fake news in the UK. Within the Counter Disinformation Unit is a Rapid Response Unit that identifies emerging areas of interest and responds swiftly to inappropriate outbreaks by having said posts (or ideas) removed from circulation, thus ensuring that factually correct information is prioritised within the public domain. In a letter to the House of Lords in May 2020, MP Caroline Dinenage outlined the purpose of the Counter Disinformation Unit, just two months after going into lockdown:

In its current iteration, the CDU expanded its remit to include identifying and responding to harmful misinformation relating to COVID-19, alongside its core function of disinformation monitoring, analysis and response […] In the current operations, the team in Cabinet Office is supported by military analysts from the Ministry of Defence […]The CDU does not respond to all pieces of potential misinformation or disinformation but takes a strategic view of an issue to offer structural and strategic interventions. (Dinenage, C. 2020)

One such intervention can be thought of in terms of in terms of the working paper, *Resist: Counter-disinformation Toolkit* (Cabinet Office, 2019), which establishes the government’s position on disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. Here, disinformation is identified as being the ‘deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain’[[11]](#footnote-11) (*Ibid*: 6). Thereafter, the *Counter-disinformation Toolkit* explores the strategic dissemination of information via key channels such as traditional media (journalists/editors), stakeholders and influencers, and social media platforms and key audiences (*Ibid*: 14). Overall, the toolkit cites the following risks being posed by disinformation. It states that when the information environment is deliberately confused or compromised it can:

* threaten public safety;
* fracture community cohesion;
* reduce trust in institutions and the media;
* undermine public acceptance of science’s role in informing policy development and implementation;
* damage our economic prosperity and our global influence; and
* undermine the integrity of government, the constitution and our democratic processes. (*Ibid*: 7)

Therefore, the given aim of developing counter-measures to thwart disinformation and fake news is to provide the general public with ‘confidence in [official] information so they are equipped to make their own decisions’ (*Ibid*). Among some of the categories listed by the Cabinet Office as posing a threat to legitimate communications are factors such as clickbait, trolling, memes, leaks of official information, and satire and parody (*Ibid*: 22). Such practices either link to further pages containing defamatory content, or are considered subversive to political and medical efforts to contain the spread of infection. In all such instances, government stakeholders are encouraged to develop appropriate counter-narratives to such threats, and to work with other departments in Whitehall for the early identification of risks.[[12]](#footnote-12) Here, for instance, counter-measures could literally be as simple as a publicity campaign that reiterates the main symptoms of coronavirus, while at the same time recommending potential in-patients self-isolate or take tests where applicable (instead of resorting to dangerous home remedies from the internet). To reiterate an earlier point, concerns such as damaging social cohesion and reducing public trust, are situated firmly within the domain of security discourse and typify the government’s initial responses to the pandemic. Of course later strategies such as the national lockdown, illustrate a range of contingency measures that venture into disciplinary territory.

Nevertheless, statistics from audience research conducted during the early stages of lockdown provides evidence the population had lost confidence in online providers (as credible sources of information), as early as June last year. According to one government source, by week twelve of the lockdown, a staggering 60% of the audience only considered news broadcasts as reliable sources of information, whereas 84% had turned to conventional news organisations just a week before (Culture, Media and Sport – Select Committee, 2020). This was typified by the BBC’s coverage of the Prime Minister’s National address on 23 March, which ‘reached 44 million people’ (*Ibid*). The national address was since claimed to have received ‘the highest number of viewers since the 2003 Iraq War’ (*Ibid*). It is relatively surprising then, with the substantial downturn in the consumption of online news, that there has been a renewed effort to control information ecologies within cyberspace – especially on social media. The general lack of interest in online sources for providing essential news updates has nonetheless been construed by government as a lack of trust in social media as dependable providers of information:

Research has shown that the public has turned away from tech companies’ platforms as a source of trusted news and towards public sector broadcasting during the COVID-19 crisis, demonstrating a lack of trust in social media. The Government must take account of this as it develops online harms legislation over the coming months. (*Ibid*)

Another way of interpreting the deficit in online audience figures is that they could have been caused by i) consumers sitting at home in front of their television sets, ii) that viewing habits changed as fewer people were commuting to work and were therefore not consuming media on mobile devices, or iii) that attempts to discredit online platforms as credible news sources had actually worked. Even so, the development of regulations to tackle ‘online harms’ over the coming few months, now changes the underlying narrative of the new normal.[[13]](#footnote-13) With regards to social media and popular opinion, this is the point at which puerile entertainment ceases to be about amusement, and in which the internet *per se*, is at risk of becoming a technology for state censorships and propaganda instead. No matter how benevolent or benign the intentions are, the use of behavioural science to influence “positive” public conduct during coronavirus is one thing, but the use of this potent discipline to manipulate public opinion and popular consent - especially in the voting booths, represents a substantial threat to democracy.The problem really occurs in terms of trust, and confidence that the content being provided by legitimate news organisations has not been manipulated beforehand - irrespective of whether the articles have been checked for accuracy with legitimate government sources or not. The involvement of the Nudge Unit in important policy-making decisions ‘from Brexit to the coronavirus crisis’, is questionable on several fronts - certainly with regards to political initiatives posited in the public domain (Orrell, 2020). However, there is also evidence to suggest that Behavioural Insights (derived from behavioural psychology) have been around for some time and that as a technique of government they have gained significant ground.

In military terms for example, in 2011 the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down[[14]](#footnote-14) commissioned Dr. Mandeep K. Dhami to explore the use of behavioural science for use in signals and counter-intelligence operations. Here, Dhami worked with Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) and its subsidiary, the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG) to explore the online use of psychology as a means to influence behaviour in the real world (Dhami, 2011, and Harbisher, 2016). The operational remit of the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group was given as follows:

JTRIG targets a range of individual, group and state actors across the globe who pose criminal, security and defence threats. JTRIG staff use a range of techniques to, for example, discredit, disrupt, delay, deny, degrade, and deter. The techniques include: uploading YouTube videos containing persuasive messages; establishing online aliases with Facebook and Twitter accounts, blogs and forum memberships for conducting HUMINT or encouraging discussion on specific issues. (Dhami, 2011: 2)

In terms of documented operations, the JTRIG has conducted human intelligence (HUMINT) campaigns against a number of high-profile domestic targets including hackers from Anonymous and LulzSec, some of whom it brought to justice for committing various security breaches. In 2015, Occupy London made allegations that the JTRIG unit had infiltrated its communications during the protest outside of St Paul’s Cathedral, and that it ‘faced various technical issues with […] computers and mobile phones’ befitting the operational activities of the group (Occupy, 2015). Here, it was alleged the JTRIG had been commissioned by HM Constabulary to interfere with the protest prior to the 2012 London Olympic Games. A substantial area for future research would be to examine the use of normative discourse to undermine the activities of campaign groups in the UK, for under lockdown restrictions all public gatherings have been made illegal (including protests). A comparative study of dissenting public discourse under the new normal would represent a timely if not urgent piece of research to conduct.

To conclude this chapter, present-day evidence of the use of behavioural science to maintain order can be considered through the use of nudges to create repulsion for unhygienic practices, and for differentiating appropriate social conduct from the abnormal (thus establishing new normative practices). In terms of separating fake news from fact, a similar paradigm has been established that condemns contrary political thought to the conspiracy fringe. It comes as no surprise that techniques developed for use in the military domain (as none-lethal forms of combat), have borrowed from the scientific and intelligence communities, and that said advances are now being deployed to maintain order in the UK. With regards to the government’s campaign against fake news ‘analysts from the Ministry of Defence’ have been drafted in to advise the Counter Disinformation Unit (Dinenage, 2020). As observed by both Sabbagh (2019), and D’Urson (2020), the military has gained substantial ground during the last two years by establishing Information Warfare Units Comprised of propagandists and hackers to wage a very different kind of war.

General Sir Nick Carter, chief of the defence staff, said members of the army’s 77th Brigade were “helping to quash rumours about misinformation, but also to counter disinformation” […] working alongside officials in the Cabinet Office’s “rapid response unit”. (D’Urso, 2020)

Therefore if ‘politics is the continuation ofwar by other means’ (Foucault, 1997: 48) in relation to behavioural science and coronavirus, the ‘boundary between peace and war has become increasingly blurred’ (Sabbagh, 2019).

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1. In reality, the statement from the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens was based on fatality rates at the time, and the migration of patients from High Consequence Infectious Disease (HCID) units into the general healthcare system as the rate of infection grew. It was an acknowledgement of an escalation of the threat, but one that was open to miscommunication and misinterpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. However, this was not developed for several weeks and still failed to mitigate the spread of infection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Claimed to be the source of the pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As the UK’s foremost Public Sector Broadcaster. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A subdivision of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Relating this back to Foucault (1975) and Sarasin (2020), the liberal model of nudge theory works especially well in terms of a society based on freedom of choice and expression, whereas the paternalistic model conforms more to the disciplinary society, in which choices are limited or dictated. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One could claim that the fundraising efforts of Captain Sir Tom Moore put the Conservative government to shame following years of public sector spending cuts and austerity. He was hailed (by the government) as a national hero for donating money to the NHS for desperately needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Notably, the anniversary celebrating the end of World War Two represented an opportunity for promoting patriotism and this can be seen reiterated in practices such as hanging bunting, and the naming of the first emergency covid hospital, after Florence Nightingale. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Depending on the political bias of the news institution in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. During the early stages of lockdown, members of Nottinghamshire Constabulary were observed in unmarked police cars in supermarket car parks, monitoring the activities of shoppers. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example, the growth in David Ike’s audience reach during the early stages of lockdown, and the potential for monetisation via YouTube advertising revenue. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Such as the Media Monitoring Unit (MMU), the Rapid Response Unit (RRU), and the Research Information Communication Unit (RICU). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The government’s White Paper on online harms intends to regulate social media under the remit of the Office for Communications, OFCOM. It aims to reduce public exposure to damaging content such as racism and child abuse, and to reduce fake news and disinformation by making social media companies financial liable for the content they allow to be posted. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Reputed for dealing with lethal chemical or biological agents such as novichok and anthrax. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)