

Is designing for behaviour change ‘creepy’?

V&A Design Culture Salon, 20 November 2015, Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Introduction by Dan Lockton, chair of session

‘Design for behaviour change’ has recently become very popular commercially, but also in government, applied to everything from sustainability to health to safety to getting people to fill in forms correctly. The UK’s Behavioural Insights Team is well-known, but the phenomenon has spread; in September, President Obama signed the executive order creating the US’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Team, with a similar remit. Of course, ‘behaviour change’ has always been with us, from Machiavelli to marketing, and from Svengali to Skinner. It’s worth exploring that history. But the current phenomenon has, I think, three elements that make it different to previous incarnations, and for each of which we have panellists tonight who have particular insights.

The first is the conscious intersection with design. We can say that all design influences our actions, whether products, services, software, environments, the structure of organisations themselves—and also the way we think about them. But designers—in industry and academia—are increasingly being asked to do it instrumentally, with an intent in mind. Is ‘behaviour’—whatever that means (and I hope we’ll explore that) a medium for designers to work with, as Robert Fabricant formerly of Frog Design said a few years back? What kind of medium is it?

The second element is the basis of the *Nudge* phenomenon, the application of behavioural economics to this area, and the one which has led to so many airport bestsellers. The stance is based around the notion of cognitive biases, that humans are systematically irrational and led astray in our decision-making by ways of thinking which are not in our best interests. And that therefore we need to be helped, ‘nudged’ by (self-described) ‘libertarian paternalists’ who can correct or exploit the shortcuts and defects in our thinking. As Gerd Gigerenzer says in a recent journal article, the phenomenon of what’s now called ‘nudging’ is not new, but justifying it on the basis of humans’ ‘innate irrationality’ is new, and needs to be explored rather than uncritically accepted—particularly where governments are involved. No design is apolitical—why would we think psychology can be?

The third element of the current design for behaviour change trend which is different to what’s gone before is the degree of quantification that is now possible. We have the Quantified Self, most visibly in the form of fitness trackers all sold on the basis of helping us change our own behaviour, but increasingly corporations and governments also have Big Data around our behaviour, our everyday actions in both the physical and digital environments—Smart Cities, Smart Homes, Internet of Things and in our workplaces too. And algorithms are making decisions using the data—decisions which may be in our interests, or may not be. And experiments with our behaviour as the dependent variable.

To declare an interest—a few years ago, I tried to bring together lots of insights from different disciplines around people’s actions, into a ‘toolkit’ that designers could use, called Design with Intent. Although it was kind of an inspiration collection for generating design concepts around behaviour change, the intention was that by collecting together lots of these techniques, it could provide a library for critique, for exploring assumptions, ethically but also assumptions about how to think about people as part of the design process. It’s been applied by people in some quite different contexts since, and I have a book building on the ideas being published by O’Reilly, the technology publisher, next year.

So, I—and I assume you—think the confluence of these elements is interesting. Is it ‘creepy’? Is it something else? When is it ethical? Where are the boundaries? Does it come down to who’s doing the changing? Is it about transparency? Do the potential benefits—health, sustainability, a ‘more efficient life’—outweigh the concerns of a few critics? Is it philanthropic or misanthropic?

Panellists: Chair: Dr Dan Lockton, Research Tutor, Innovation Design Engineering, RCA; Dr Jessica Pykett, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, University of Birmingham; Professor Peter John, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, UCL; Dr Phoebe Moore, Senior Lecturer, Department of Law and Politics, Middlesex University; Dr Simon Blyth, Founder of Actant design research consultancy; Dr Alison Powell, Assistant Professor, Department of Media and Communication, LSE