Unmasking the Informational Logics of Liberal Democracy - making sense of the 'nudge' agenda

Introduction

A growing number of contributions positioned at the intersection between public administration, policy studies, media sociology and information science have outlined the contours of a new governance paradigm, driven by the process of mediatization and the rise of the network society. This new governance paradigm includes e-governance (Budd & Harris, 2009; Finger & Fouzia, 2012) as well as network governance, communicative governance and good governance (Bang, 2003; Chadwick, 2013; Crozier, 2007; Fuchs, 2009; Hajer, 2009; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Hale, 2011; Roberts, 2015). What these various incarnations of the new governance paradigm share, however, is the notion that state and government is undergoing what Castells has called the ‘imperative but often difficult’ transition from the modern state to a late modern ‘network state’ based on the adoption of the informational logic prevailing in the network society and the ‘information age’ (Castells, 2005, p. 17).

The purpose of this article is to bring the question of political logic back in to this growing debate. Existing approaches generally assume that mediatization and the rise of network society force state and government to adopt and internalize the informational logic of network society, resulting in the rise of a new informational paradigm of government action including e-governance as well as the wider concepts of network governance and communicative governance. A more comprehensive
analysis of this development, however, requires an increased focus on the political logics that define the role of information and the use of media technology within the political system itself.

More specifically, I shall argue that the current rise of the governance paradigm is based on a political logic of nudging, referring to the term coined by Thaler and Sunstein (2009), based on a political theory of ‘libertarian paternalism’ (2003). In spite of its more widely acknowledged background in behavioral economics and social psychology, the nudging agenda advances a form of governmental intervention based on the management of informational flows and the assembly of hybrid media systems in the construction of so-called ‘choice architecture’. As such, nudging is a particularly poignant (though perhaps still somewhat extreme) example of how the informational logic is embraced and shaped by the prevailing governmental rationality and practice in advanced liberal democracies. Nudging is, however, not in itself a democratic practice although it will often lay claim to democratic legitimacy.

In order to provide context for this claim, the first step in the article, following a short survey of the dominant understanding of the informational logic of network society, is to develop an integrated model of political logics about the role of information and the use of media technology. In addition to the logic of nudging, this framework includes the more established logics of propaganda, publicity and the educational purpose of traditional public information campaigns. In the second part of the article, the basic principles and specific mechanisms of nudging are elaborated and exemplified further. Thirdly, the article offers some further reflections on the novelty and particularity of nudging, contrasting it with the more established logics of propaganda and education identified in the general model. Finally, the article offers some reflections on the complex position of nudging in relation to the logic of publicity and democracy in a wider sense.
The informational logic of network society

The most comprehensive and influential analysis of the transformative power of media technology, in particular ICT’s and new social media, is Castells’ analysis of network society in which ‘social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies’ have become the primary form of organization and key source of transformation across the economy, civil society and the state (Castells, 2001, p. 4). Networks are of course, as Castells readily acknowledges, an old form of social organization. However, the development and spread of digital communication technology has drastically enhanced network building and network performance to the point where ‘key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks’ (p. 2).

Network society is fundamentally organized according to the function and logic of information networks facilitated by digital media technology. In this sense, the network society is also an inherently informational society. The proliferation of informational networks is the key dynamic in the structural transformation from modern society to the late modern network society in which knowledge economy gradually replaces industrial economy, ongoing identity work replaces the fixed identities of stable social institutions, and creative political management and leadership replace input politics and bureaucratic implementation (Author, 2009). All of these transformations add up to the conclusion that the network society heralds in an information age in which informational networks provide the primary principles of societal organization and practice (Castells, 2000).

Informational logic, in other words, is established at the level of networks. Rather than the particular attributes of ICT’s or other media technologies, it is the basic morphology, function and capacities of information networks that define informational logic before anything else. The key
dimensions of informational logic, correspondingly, include globalization (networks have the potential for global reach, albeit national interventions may still ward off networks), connectivity (the organization of networks in nodes and hubs ensure multiple points of connection), flexibility (networks can be build and modified faster than other forms of organization), scalability (networks can be formed and reformed to suit any level of action), complexity (networks provide a form of ‘organized complexity’), self-organization (networks can form and function without central or hierarchical guidance), recursion (networks process information in a non-linear and modulating way) (Castells, 2005; Chadwick, 2013; Crozier, 2007; Lash, 2002; Roberts, 2015).

Informational logic is, however, also dependent on the specific attributes of the media technologies supporting the proliferation of networks. Although ICT’s and new social media play a particularly crucial part in the rise of network society, ‘old’ mass media and other forms of media technology still matter for the proliferation of informational networks (Castells, 2007). The proliferation of informational networks is thus intrinsically linked to the wider process of mediatization, i.e. the increasingly ‘broad consequences for everyday life and practical organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media, and more particularly the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, pp. 191, see also Lundby, 2009; Hepp, 2013).

Although ICT and new social media remain a decisive leap in the history of media technology, their impact must be seen against the background of the general process of mediatization, including a) the shear accumulation of different media technologies, b) increased access to media technologies, which is in no small measure related to issues of mass production, purchasing power and state regulation and not least c) the convergence or integration of different media technologies and ‘cross-mediality’. In this context, a network must always be seen as an assemblage of media technologies and the media logics they carry with them, i.e. the standardized formats for ‘selection,
organization and presentation’ of information, based on the ‘distinctive features’ of each medium (Altheide, 2013, p. 225).

Media logic denotes the ‘protocols’ of action forming a ‘nebula’ around the ‘nucleus’ of media technology, i.e. a ‘vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions’ surrounding the ‘hardware’ of media technology (Gitelman, 2006, p. 6), including such diverse phenomena as documentation systems, posting and blogging, journalistic news production, visual aesthetics, etc. Rather than a straightforward result of ICT’s, then, informational networks should be considered ‘hybrid’ media systems based on different media technologies and the ‘evolving interrelationships among older and newer media logics’ (Chadwick, 2013, pp. 24, see also Castells, 2007; Dahlgren, 2009). The current ‘era’ of digital media is based on a reconfiguration and recombination of earlier media technologies and associated logics (Chadwick, 2013, p. 25).

**Bringing political logic back in**

The dominant interpretation of the effects of mediatization and the rise of network society for state and government has been summarized in exemplary fashion by Castells as an ‘imperative but often difficult’ transformation from the nation-state to a ‘network state’. This transition includes: ‘the diffusion of e-governance (a broader concept than e-government because it includes citizen participation and political decision-making); e-health; e-learning; e-security; and a system of dynamic regulation of the communication industry, adapting it to the values and needs of society’ (2005, p. 17). The transition to a network state is, however, not limited to e-governance, even in the broadest sense. The network state requires a fundamental transformation of governmental practices that amount to a complete ‘transformation of political management, representation and domination under the conditions of network society’ (p. 16).
Even more than e-governance, the transition towards a network state requires the development of network governance and communicative governance, which bring the informational logic of network society to bear on governmental rationality and practice at the most fundamental level. E-governance, network governance, communicative governance and substantial parts of the good governance agenda, correspondingly, revolves around the shared notion that a new informational and communicative paradigm of government action based on ‘communication’, ‘dialogue’, ‘reciprocity’, ‘trust’ and ‘reflexivity’ is empirically manifest and, in many cases, also normatively desirable (Bang, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Hajer, 2009; Jessop, 2011; Meuleman, 2008). Governance, thus understood, involves the ‘internalization’ of informational logic (Chadwick, 2013, p. 20) and the rise of a new ‘recursive informational logic that attempts to deal with the transformative effects of flows’ within the political system (Crozier, 2007, p. 7).

There is no reason to question the fundamental importance of mediatization as a force of societal transformation and a challenge for state and government. However, the dominant idea of an imperative but difficult transition to a network state is also based on a somewhat problematic contrast between the inherently informational logic enveloping state and government from the outside and the forms of governmental rationality and practice internal to the political system itself. The informational logic of network society is seen to colonize the political system, either through a process of strategic adaptation in states with sufficient foresight or through a process of resistance and delay in less advanced states.

This understanding is based on stark contrast between the late modern network state committed to the informational paradigm and the modern state, including the bureaucratic state, the regulatory state and the welfare state. As Castells adamantly states, the informational logic of network society is in ‘complete contradiction’ to the bureaucratic state (Castells, 2005, p. 17) and requires new, smarter, innovative and creative welfare polices in order to ‘deliberately advance human well-being.
in the new historical context’ (Castells, 2005, p. 18). Network governance and communicative governance is consistently contrasted with the old ‘state’ tradition of governance based on hierarchy, regulatory politics and legal sanctions, as well as NPM-style market governance (for particularly illustrative examples, see Jessop, 2011; Meuleman, 2008). This contrast is, however, analytically over-simplified and furthermore endemic to the sometimes rather rash democratic expectations pinned to the rise of informational logic in government.

A more comprehensive approach to the transformation of government in the age of information is to analyze how the informational logic of network society affects the various forms of informational logic present within the political system itself. These can be understood as political logics, meaning distinct notion about the purpose, value and function of information and the use of media technology ingrained in particular forms of governmental practice, and ultimately related to a particular type of political rationality. Developing a comprehensive and consistent framework for this line of analysis, however, requires an engagement of other strands of literature.

The most established definition relates political logic to electoral campaigning. This definition, found in the wider field of political communication studies, is based on a distinction between media logic, primarily as it applies to mass media and journalistic practice, and a political logic defined by the framework of electoral institutions and the realm of party-politics (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Norris, 2000; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Correspondingly, political logic is first and foremost defined as a vote- and office-seeking logic, and to some extent also a policy-seeking logic, based on a theory of party behavior (Landerer, 2013). Polity issues have also been added to this form of electoral political logic (Meyer & Hinchmann, 2002).
A second cluster of literature important to the question of political logic, albeit rarely employing the term, is found in the debate on public information campaigns (Klingemann & Römmele, 2002; Rice & Atkin, 2013). Largely reflecting the underlying disciplinary separation between comparative politics and public policy/administration studies, the debate on policy campaigning largely sets aside the issue of electoral institutions for a focus on the relevance of public communication for implementation efficiency, i.e. the extent to which public communication provide better policy outputs and/or outcomes. Moreover, the value, function and purpose of information and communication is linked to the issue of policy input, i.e. attempts to improve public policies through better information and more communication (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994).

The model depicted in figure 1 locates these two forms of campaigning along two different axes of political logic pertaining, respectively, to the distinct political rationalities of sovereignty and the political rationality of ‘population management’ for the purpose of security of the population itself ‘and those who govern it’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 66). This framework is based on a more general analysis of governmental practice regimes elaborated elsewhere (Author, 2015). In this context, a key implication of this approach is that the problems of electoral campaigning are seen as indicative of a more fundamental distinction between the political logics of propaganda and publicity framed by the century-old conflict between feudal sovereignty and popular sovereignty. Public information campaigns, for their part, are traditionally based on a disciplinary logic of education for the benefit of the population.
E-governance, network governance, communicative governance and good governance are, however, primarily based on a fourth type of political logic designated here as nudging. Nudging is historically linked, but also radically opposed to the disciplinary idea of education found in traditional information campaigns. Moreover, nudging resides in a close relation to the political logic of publicity, which is the source of a substantial level of confusion about the democratic value of governance. The transition to a network state and the rise of the governance paradigm, thus understood, must be seen not simply as the rise of a more communicative and informational form of government, but also as the proliferation of form of governmental practice and rationality based on a political logic of nudging. I shall return to the distinctions and relations suggested by the model in the last part of the article. First, the political of nudging is explored in more detail.
The political logic of nudging

At a first glance, it may seem peculiar to interpret nudging as a form of political logic in the sense of the word used here. During its rapid rise to prominence, the nudging agenda has been associated mainly with a surge of behavioral design, social psychology, experimental research and evidence in public policy-making. This understanding certainly seems warranted by Thaler and Sunstein’s own emphasis on behavioral economy (and Richard Thaler’s background in this discipline) in their original outline of the nudging agenda. In spite of this association to disciplines that have a limited and rather particular view on information and communication at best, a closer look at the nudging agenda nevertheless reveals that the overall object of ‘guiding’ citizens towards more ‘health, wealth and happiness’ is to be achieved principally through the use of a broad range of media technology and careful management of the flow of information (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009).

The source of this regulatory thinking is not found in the concept of nudging itself, but rather the political theory of ‘libertarian paternalism’ that underpins the nudging agenda. The seemingly oxymoronic concept of libertarian paternalism argues for the legitimacy of governmental interventions that does not restrict free choice. The libertarian of the nudging agenda is defined by a basic commitment to the standard of free choice for citizens. The paternalistic side, however, involves a governmental responsibility for the quality of choice, meaning the level of individual and collective health, wealth and happiness achieved. The reason that libertarian paternalism is not oxymoronic, as maintained by Thaler and Sunstein (2003) is that it is limited to merely correcting the flaws of individual decision-making and guiding citizens towards better decisions without interfering with free choice. In order to resolve the opposing forces of libertarianism and paternalism, state and government must abstain from traditional paternalistic forms of regulation that restrict free choice too much at the level of concrete interventions.
Given the conditions placed upon concrete governmental action by libertarian paternalism, it is perhaps less surprising that the established definition of a nudge is nominally empty: ‘A nudge, as we will use the term, is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 6). The fact that the definition only states what state and government are not supposed to do, i.e. impose legal prohibitions and sanctions or fiddle excessively with economic incentives, is understandable insofar as the main concern of libertarian paternalism is to avoid the conventional paternalism of disciplinary government. However, libertarian paternalism is not simply advancing laissez faire or minimal government. Rather, legal sanctions and economic penalties are shunned because they are irrelevant or even detrimental to the efficiency of what nudging is about: guiding individual behavior through information and communication.

The solution to the immediate conundrum of libertarian paternalism, then, is communicative governance. As Thaler and Sunstein state: ‘we are not for bigger government, just for better governance’ (2009, p. 15). Better governance conducted as nudging means that politicians and administrators have to take on the role of public ‘choice architects’ constructing a ‘choice architecture’ around individual choices about energy consumption, health, education, housing, pensions etc. The public choice architect directs the informational flow surrounding individual choice in such a way that freedom is respected while also guiding citizens towards choices that save money, reduce energy consumption, mitigate climate change, enhance social mobility, ensure sufficient levels of saving etc.

In general, the construction of choice architecture can be understood as the careful elaboration of informational networks, based on the assembly of various media in a hybrid media system, directing the informational flow around individual choice. Nudging requires extensive use of media, ranging from the most low-tech solutions such as posters, flyers and letters to the elaborate use of ICT and
new social media. Nudging may also involve the old mass media and hence rely on negotiation with journalistic standards. Moreover, industrial design, spatial planning, actual architecture and engineering can play a substantial part in the construction of public choice architecture, effectively making trash bins, buildings and urban spaces into communication media that function as part of the hybrid media system making up a particular choice architecture. This extensive use of media technology is, however, premised on a more fundamental idea about the regulatory value of information and communication.

The six informational mechanisms of nudging

Nudging is an operational program of governance based on construction of informational networks and the assembly of hybrid media systems. Legal frameworks are needed merely to define the initial conditions and ‘defaults’ of public choice architecture (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 54). Economic incentives, for their part, is the least essential part of nudging: incentives can be used sparsely in choice architecture, but cannot impose substantial economic penalties on making ‘wrong’ choices (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 63). This downgrading or outright exclusion of the conventional means of legal coercions and economic penalties is, however, proposed in to allow a number of assumed informational effects on behavior to come into play. Although no systematic discussion of these effects is offered by Thaler and Sunstein or others working within the nudge agenda, we can reconstruct six distinct mechanisms, in order of ascending effects on behavior:

1) The most basic mechanism in the construction of choice architecture is the availability of information, referred to by Thaler and Sunstein as disclosure. Disclosure is essentially a way to remove obstacles and create a path of least resistance to the correct choice. Information about the effects of choice is often difficult to obtain, and people are not likely to spend much time looking for it, which means that the necessary information must be made available by choice architects. The
construction of choice architecture, by the same token, requires additional strategies of simplification beyond the mere act of disclosure. Such simplification strategies are referred to as mapping and structuring of complex choices.

One particularly prominent application of the combined principles of disclosure and simplification is RECAP, an instrument of government intervention making it possible to Record, Evaluate and Compare Alternative Prices, for example by applying a usage disclosure requirement to cell phone operators and credit card companies (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 102). Taking the comparative logic a step further produces one of the most widely applied simplification strategies in current liberal government: ranking. Ranking is an ideal simplification mechanism, making choices easier by presenting an order of differences in prices and/or performance. Although the ‘P’ in RECAP refers to prices, it also applies to performance in a broader sense: making information about school performance available to those choosing a school for their children also involves the use of disclosure and the RECAP instrument.

Other examples of simplification strategies involve the use of calculation instruments, such as online calculation of required levels of saving for retirement. The structuring of complex choices is also an important tool in deliberative and network-oriented forms of governance. Conducting an experiment to generate more neighborhood volunteering, a group of British choice architects concludes that a key reason for the partial failure of the project, referring specifically to the structuring of complex choices, was that ‘the choices we tilted people towards were not attractive or tailored enough’ (John et al., 2013, p. 64). In this context, simplification is interpreted as a key ‘enabler’ of political mobilization and participation.

2) Moving beyond the removal of informational barriers on the path to the right choice, nudging involves heavily on feedback. In general, feedback involves the systematic demonstration of the
causal relationship between specific choices and particular security effects on health, wealth and happiness, or any other extension of liberal security. Feedback can be generic or individualized and responsive towards concrete choices made by individuals and organizations. The essential feature of feedback in either case is the systematic illustration of losses and/or gains associated with particular forms of behavior. The British ‘Your Life’ campaign, intended to nudge young people towards an education in math or physics in order to ensure that ‘the U.K. has the mathematics and science skills it needs to succeed in the global competitive economy’ provides preemptive feedback by outlining ‘life in a parallel universe’ of opportunities to travel, to be creative and in control, made possible by the proper choice (http://yourlife.org.uk/). The use of health stickers on cigarette packages is another prominent form of feedback, although the bluntness of such ‘aggressive campaigning’ also borders on a disciplinary, prohibitive and ‘nagging’ form of communication (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, pp. 235, Sunstein, 2015).

A particularly prominent area of feedback-based nudging is environmental and energy policy. Energy footprints, the Green Lights Program developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and later adopted by the EU, and web applications calculating energy savings all rely on the demonstration of negative and/or positive security effects ranging from individual financial savings to the survival of the human race in an effort to reduce energy consumption. Although incentives and disclosure play a key part in efforts to ‘save the planet’, the most ‘ambitious’ idea mentioned by Thaler and Sunstein is the ‘Ambient Orb’, a device displaying energy consumption through simple color coding and thus, in principle, making it possible to ‘ensure that people see, each day, how much energy they have used’ (2009, p. 206). To further enhance the effect of the Orb, additional technologies have been developed that makes the recorded information available online on Facebook or other platforms.
3) A more direct mechanism is *social influence*. In general, social influence refers to the adaptation of behavior to existing behavior within and between social groups. Social influence is based, in psychological terms, on a basic inclination to act in accordance with the established rules of conduct, real or perceived, within primary social groups. In contrast to feedback, public communication based on the mechanism of social influence does not need to demonstrate effects, but rather to establish certain types of behavior as normal behavior. In its simplest form, social influence can be pursued by establishing the norm factually, often in an effort to correct misconceptions about normal behavior, for example by releasing information about high levels of tax compliance, low levels of underage drinking and crime rates etc. Normal behavior can also be defined as the exemplary behavior of celebrities and other ‘ambassadors’ within the social group, such as actors, athletes and musicians. Social influence can, however, also be pursued more aggressively through strategic attempts to create peer pressure.

Nudging turns social influence into pressure by adding the experience of being watched or held accountable to the standards of normal behavior by one’s peers. This can be done by a variety of more or less subtle accountability measures, ranging from the use of human faces giving literal form to the gaze of one’s peers in order to reduce littering and the use of emoticons to signify social (dis)approval of energy consumption to black-listing, naming and shaming of subpar performers. In an attempt to generate more participation in recycling schemes, the aforementioned group of British choice architects used the rather simply medium of postcards informing about average levels of participation for the area and smileys reflecting the performance of the particular street (John et al., 2013, p. 50). In a wider sense, this logic reflects one of the basic principles of network management in the governance paradigm: the creation of social groups that can serve as a basic for peer pressure, irrespective of whether such groups are found in local neighborhoods or consists of member states.
comparing their performance under the guidelines of the ‘open method of coordination’ in the EU (Heidenreich & Zeitlin, 2009).

4) Although the use of social influence can be said to apply varying degrees of pressure to individuals and organizations, it is still largely intended to influence behavior through a process of reasoned choice-making. Priming can be understood as the process of building more or less stable pathways and shortcuts in the ‘associative network’ of psychic and/or communicative systems based on the activation of one particular node in the network. Priming thus implies an increased likelihood for a particular node to be activated in the course of information processing, even if the issue or event being processed has nothing to do with what originally produced the primary status of the node. The primed node thus effectively becomes a source of interpretation, opinion formation and evaluation in other parts of the associative network, for example when the primacy of certain political issues affects the evaluation of political candidates, other countries etc. (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Potential reasons for the primacy of the node include the accessibility of the node, i.e. its presence in short-term memory due to recent and/or frequent repetition, and the applicability of the node to new and different pieces of information (Brewer, Graf, & Willnat, 2003).

Whereas accessibility of information, feedback and social influence are all based on the premise that the automated system of human information processing is a source of decision-making flaws that must be corrected by activation of the reflective system, priming effectively makes the automated system itself the target of intervention. Priming essentially seeks to condition behavior more or less automatically by activating the shortcuts in the associative network, i.e. to ‘’prime’’ people into certain forms of behavior by offering apparently irrelevant cues’ and mental ‘anchors’ such as numbers, questions or images that can be used in order to ‘ever so-subtly suggesting a starting point for your thinking process’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 77). Anchoring thus consists in the strategic attempt to provide an informational starting point that will affect the evaluation of an
otherwise unrelated issue. Anchoring is, however, also a relatively restricted and short-term use of priming. Priming can easily involve broader, more long-term and potentially more effective efforts to make particular issues or concepts the ‘anchors’ of decision-making processes.

5) Whereas the potential concerns related to the potential minimization of choice remain rather implicit in Thaler and Sunstein’s discussion of priming, it becomes explicit in the case of framing: ‘Frames are powerful nudges, and must be selected with caution’ (2009, p. 40). In general, frames are akin to primes in terms of the underlying psychological mechanisms, but refer to a different type of socio-psychological construct with a potential for greater effects on information processing and opinion formation. The relation between priming and framing has been described as ‘indirect’ vis-à-vis ‘direct’ effects (Brewer et al., 2003). Whereas priming usually refers to the primacy of specific issues or concepts, frames are ‘organizing ideas’ (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002, p. 105) that give salience to particular issues, promoting particular problems and solutions based on specific causal relationships and moral standards (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Thaler and Sunstein restrict their discussion of framing to differences in formulation and wording of choices, in particular in cases such as medical treatment and selection of pensions plans (2009, p. 167).

Whether the intention is to indicate the level of framing acceptable to liberal government, given the initial cautionary remark, is not clear. What does remain clear, however, is that the potential use of framing goes far beyond mere wording of choice options. The importance of framing lies not so much in wording sequences and contextual information presented with a specific choice, as in the framing of choice as the prudent exercise of freedom based on calculus of security. On this level, framing is employed as an operationalization of the liberal game of freedom and security in relation to a particular aspect of health, wealth and happiness. Given the regulatory restrictions in the liberal game of freedom and security, liberal government is particularly dependent on the activity of framing. In the governance paradigm, this framing imperative is discussed as the importance of
performativity, narratives, and storylines in order to qualitatively improve public policy (Hajer, 2009).

6) The final mechanism can be designated as gaming. This mechanism is not discussed directly by Thaler and Sunstein, but nevertheless remains a crucial add-on to the above mechanisms. Efforts to reduce energy consumption through feedback, for example, can be enhanced by arranging competitions between citizens or companies to post the biggest energy reductions online (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009, p. 194). Efforts to improve public health can structure competitions to lose the most weight, clock the longest runs etc. However, games need not be strictly competitive. Games can be structured as playful and creative, as evidenced by the invitation to ‘being part of Formula 100’ by adding an invention to the long list of great historical inventions, which constitutes the other major component of the aforementioned ‘Your Life’ campaign. The ‘Dumb ways to die’ campaign, commissioned by Metro Trains Melbourne, approaches gaming more literally by adding a game module to the (viral) song and video.

In a wider sense, nudging based on gaming can be said to act on a basic socio-psychological inclination towards playing and creating. This inclination is akin to what has been called the ‘activation’ mechanism in information exposure (Donohew, Palmgreen, & Duncan, 1980) and the notion of ‘user activation’, which has become a mantra for the use of social media in commercial marketing. However, gaming goes beyond activation as a condition for information exposure. The crucial aspect of gaming is that the target audience is effectively transformed to active participants and co-producers, investing time and effort in playing a particular game set up by the choice architecture, meaning that choice-making becomes completely ingrained in activities such as playing, inventing and/or competing.
What is new about nudging?

The claim that the use of the above mechanisms by public choice architects assembling hybrid media systems and managing informational flows amount to a distinct and rather recent form of political logic, however, requires some further reflection on the past and present relations between nudging and more established political information logics. Thaler and Sunstein offer a starting point for such a discussion in one of the few direct reflections offered about the role of public information: ‘[critics] might object that if we permit information campaigns that encourage people to conserve energy, a government propaganda machine will move rapidly from education to outright manipulation to coercion and bans’ (2009, p. 235). This correspondence with past and future critics touches on the relation, on the one hand, between nudging and the educational logic of public information and, on the other hand, between nudging and the political logic of propaganda.

With respect to the first relation, the model indicate that there is indeed a close and sometimes ambiguous relation between nudging and the educational purpose of traditional public information campaigns. The key to this relation, however, is the fact that the educational logic, at its core, is intrinsically related to a form of ‘disciplinary’ government, striving to ensure the security of the population and those who govern it through the specification of behavioral norms, drills, exercises, surveillance, incarceration and correctional institutions (Foucault, 1995). The traditional public information campaign must, correspondingly, be seen as a part of a this broader array of instruments and governmental rationality, which, according to this line of analysis is the administrative modernity of bureaucracy ‘par excellence’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 321).

The role of the public information campaign in this context is and important, although somewhat secondary to the more widely discussed instruments of population management found in disciplinary government. The information campaign is intended to provide citizens with productive
knowledge, officially recognized and deemed vital to the well-being of the population. In addition to the information campaigns run for this purpose directly by the bureaucracy itself, the idea of educational purpose is also visible in the idea of public service ingrained in various models of broadcast governance intended to strike a balance between political logic and journalistic criteria in the broadcast media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Humphreys, 1996; Norris & Holtz-Bacha, 2001).

The disciplinary roots of the public information campaign are the source of the somewhat ambiguous relation between nudging and traditional public campaigning. On the one hand, libertarian paternalism, and any other incarnation of what has been called advanced liberal government (Rose, 1999), is vehemently opposed to disciplinary government. This stance is not a matter of being opposed to authoritarian government, which is sometimes mistakenly taken as a synonym for disciplinary government, but rather of proclaiming the futility of bureaucracy, legal command and conventional welfare regulation in exactly the same way as done by Castells and proponents of the governance paradigm. The issue is not whether disciplinary government is illegitimate as such, but rather that it is inefficient from a regulatory standpoint.

On the other hand, the concrete practice of nudging nevertheless maintains a clear educational ambition and an overall concern for individual and collective welfare (i.e. ‘health, wealth and happiness’). As such, the notion of libertarian paternalism accurately expresses the challenge of rejecting the strict paternalism of disciplinary government with a revised form of paternalism based on the exercise of free choice and the ambition to ‘empower’ citizens. On the level of specific interventions and choice architectures, this problematic translates into persistent attempts to dislodge the educational ambition of the conventional information campaign from its disciplinary foundation. The public choice architect has to act not as an authoritative school master, but rather as a benevolent supervisor guiding, nurturing and even emancipating citizens.
As illustrated by the concern for the cut-off point between nudging and ‘nagging’ forms of communication, there is an ever-present concern for endangering the informational mechanisms of nudging through the design of choice architecture that is too educational, too normative and too instructional. The conventional information campaign is, from a nudging perspective, too concerned with behavioral conformity and, by the same token, usually linked to the ever-present disciplinary preoccupation with surveillance meant to ensure such conformity. Although this concern may be clear in principle, however, it remains difficult to maintain in practice. Correspondingly, concrete instances of nudging will, more often than not, display tendencies that are barely distinguishable from disciplinary education and surveillance.

In addition to the issue of educational logic, Thaler and Sunstein’s reflection on possible criticism levelled at nudging also displays a second an even more fundamental concern: the risk that nudging might end up as propaganda. This concern has also gained considerable attention in the wider debate on nudging, which has been preoccupied with the issue of whether or when nudging is simply a revised form of propaganda and straightforward ‘manipulation’ of choice (Hansen & Jespersen, 2013; Rebonato, 2012; Vallgårda, 2012).

In contrast to most contributions on the issue, the model applied here separates the political logic of propaganda from the disciplinary idea of education. Although there is a close relation between these two logics and their underlying forms of governmental practice, they remain historically and conceptually distinct (see Author, 2015 for a full elaboration of this argument). In relation to the problem of nudging, this approach suggests that we must distinguish between the complex combination of historical indebtedness and opposition to educational campaigning found in nudging and a complete incompatibility with the classical political logic of propaganda.
Propaganda is, historically speaking, the most basic informational logic in the political system. Propaganda essentially consists in the use of media with the purpose of extending and maintaining domination. As such, propaganda is historically related to the political rationality of dynastic sovereignty and the ‘royal prerogatives’ of exception from legal order. Based on this initial historical bond, propaganda has been a consistent feature of the political system for more than half a millennium (Cull, Culbert, & Welch, 2006). This intrinsic relation between the political rationality of domination and the propaganda logic of communication is archetypically illustrated by the case of warfare (Kellner, 2004). The use of communication media in times of war provide an exemplary inventory of all of the essential instruments of propaganda, including control of the information flow, deception, distortion, manipulation, the manufacturing of consent etc. (Carruthers, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; O'Shaughnessy, 2004).

From a communication perspective, the conventional adage that war is the continuation of politics by other means can of course be reversed, meaning that propaganda in itself turns politics into war. This perspective has gained renewed interest in what has been called the ‘third age’ of political communication (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) and the era of ‘permanent campaigning’ (Norris, 2000). Professionalized campaigning, Political PR, marketing and ‘spin’ can all be seen as expressions of a continuous effort to maintain the propaganda logic of ‘deception’ and ‘corruption’ of public information under conditions of mediatization (Bennett & Manheim, 2001).

In addition to the more widely discussed realm of electoral campaigning, renewed propaganda efforts have also been identified in the public campaign efforts related to the various ‘wars’ waged on crime (Simon, 2007), drugs (Benavie, 2009) and obesity (Monoghan, 2008). This type of public campaigning is, however, completely antithetical to nudging. Whereas the danger of ‘nagging’ educational information follows nudging more like a shadow or an underlying concern, the propaganda logic is a fully lit counter-image to nudging. The strategic use of distortion, secrecy and
deception coupled with other propaganda mainstays such as the binary of friends and enemies, intensification of emotional responses, identity building etc., are completely dysfunctional from a nudging perspective. In this sense it is somewhat misconstrued to consider propaganda the main problem related to nudging. This is not to say, however, that nudging does not give rise to normative concerns.

**Is nudging democratic?**

One reason for the widespread use of the propaganda label is the fact that it is often used simply as an equivalent to ‘undemocratic’. Although this is not entirely unreasonable given the historical relation to feudal sovereignty and domination, the democratic alternative to propaganda has its own particular limitations in terms of political logic. The historical and structural counter-logic to propaganda is *publicity*. The basic opposition between propaganda and publicity is based on the long historical struggle to impose limits on feudal domination and royal prerogatives through an alternative governmental practice of popular sovereignty, legally protected rights, constitutional safeguards and, in its most developed form, fully fledged democracy.

The logic of publicity is an administrative principle before anything else, based on the codification of the public/private divide as a distinction between visibility and secrecy (Thompson, 1995). Publicity counters the feudal, royal prerogative of secrecy at the heart of domination with an administrative practice of documentation, openness, access, and transparency. In addition to this administrative dimension, the logic of publicity is also associated with the democratic principles of representation and deliberation through its extension to concepts such as public opinion and the public sphere, based on the institutionalization of political rights to congregate and express opinions. As reflected by the debate on the democratic potentials of new media, the informational logic of network society is often seen to reinforce the publicity principle, creating new opportunities
for communicative and ‘connective’ action, participation and activism (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Dahlgren, 2009; Roberts, 2014).

Although nudging is not propaganda, it is not exactly democratic either. As suggested by the above model, there is a close tangential relation between the democratic principle of publicity and nudging. On the one hand, it is evident that the various nudging mechanisms rely on a significant degree of publicity and access to information in order to function properly. Faced with a choice between secrecy and openness, between command and deliberation, public choice architects remain committed to the latter. However, this stance is not a reflection of a fundamental commitment to the principle of publicity in itself. The logic of nudging is rather that sufficient degree of publicity is a basic condition for the construction of efficient choice architectures with sufficient potential to guide citizens towards the choices deemed the most beneficial in relation to a given policy goal.

This complex, neighboring relation between the publicity principle and nudging reflects the underlying relation between democracy and the type of good governance that Thaler and Sunstein are explicitly pursuing. The exercise of good governance involves a claim to democratic legitimacy based on standards such as accountability and stakeholder involvement. Such standards are, however, based on a reinterpretation of democracy as a matter of output legitimacy rather than of representation, deliberation or participation. In similar fashion, nudging can be said to involve a subtle reworking of the publicity principle in order to pursue a form of politics of necessity that may no longer be the population management of disciplinary government, but nevertheless remains firmly committed to ensuring the health, wealth and happiness of the population. Correspondingly, it is particularly important to acknowledge the particular nature of the political logic of nudging in the current debate on the democratic potentials of informational logic and networks.
This is not to say that informational networks cannot be used to take ‘connective action’ from below, i.e. to create new avenues of activism and protest linking personal motives and action frames together in digitally enhanced, loosely coupled and scalable networks with a high potential for affecting political outcomes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Chadwick, 2013). It is crucial, however, that the potential for connective action is measured not only against the tried and tested logics of propaganda and disciplinary education, which is currently the dominant approach. Whereas the contrast between informational logic and these older forms of political logic is easily recognized, nudging and communicative governance embraces informational logic, using it proactively as the centerpiece of regulatory programs based on specific informational mechanisms. Indeed, nudging and communicative governance can be seen as form of connective action ‘from above’, which is often hard to distinguish from connective action ‘from below’.

**Conclusion**

The logic of nudging raises important questions about the role of informational logic in state and government. In particular, the analysis of nudging and the proposed model provides a more comprehensive framework for our understanding of the various logics that define political responses to the spread of media technology, the increased prevalence of informational logic and the proliferation of networks in networks society. In contrast to the widespread assumption that the informational logic, either in the shape of network logic or a media logic, is colonizing or taking over the political system from the outside, a closer look at the old and new forms of political rationality about the role of information and the use media technology suggests that there is more to current developments than an ‘imperative but difficult’ transition to a network state.

Unmasking nudging as a more subtle form of propaganda or disciplinary intervention is in this sense largely misconstrued, at least insofar as these political logics are in fact detrimental to the
regulatory program of nudging and liberal paternalism. The problem with nudging, concluding on a
normative note, is that it is exactly what it claims to be: a program of intervention that seeks to
guide and even emancipate citizens to make the correct choices based on standards of health, wealth
and happiness. Although this is neither propaganda nor the unlimited regulatory ambition of
disciplinary government, it is nevertheless a form of regulatory ambition that seeks to envelop every
aspect of free choice, and the exercise of freedom in a wider sense, in a choice architecture of
informational flows and the assembly of hybrid media systems.

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