

A nudge for behaviour change: new jargon for an old theory of praise, recognition and peer pressure to achieve the Big Society

Professor Peter John, Co-director of the
Institute for Political and Economic
Governance, Manchester University

The starting point

- Citizens are not passive - often interested in politics and civic action
- But often they find it hard to translate interest and intentions into reality
- The behavioural economics take on this is that they tend to use short-cuts and go for easy options that involve doing nothing - equivalent to leaving the letter on the mantelpiece

Nudge

- So citizens may need a cue, a framed message, or a default to option to get them to where they want to go. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*
- Not the nanny state - not bossy
- Generally, I assume policy-makers from different persuasions do not have a problem with nudge (no *necessary* connection to public spending cuts, rollback of the state and so on)
- The big issue is whether it works, and what might increase the impact, and whether we are happy with the mechanisms the state is using

Making collective acts public

- The key claim I am going to explore is whether making acts public increases the likelihood of a citizen doing something
- The answer is yes – you can double the impact
- But question is by what mechanism
- My argument is that we should prefer to have mechanisms of visibility that encourage collective action based on social information rather than rely on social pressure

Mechanism: social pressure

- The idea that if you know someone else is doing something you get pressured into out of conformity, even shamed into it
- Example: Gerber, Green and Larimer, 'Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment', APSR 2009.
- Sought to raise voter turnout using experiments
- Percentage Voting (control) 29.7%
- Civic Duty 31.5%
- Hawthorne (told being watched) 32.2%
- Self (listing voting record of household) 34.5%
- Neighbours (list voting records of neighbours) 37.8%

Mechanism: recognition

- Cotterill et al. (2010) test the whether the numbers of books citizens donate to charity depend on the manner in which they were asked.
- The research team randomly allocated 11,812 households in two electoral wards:
 - a control group that were just asked to donate books to Africa
 - a pledge group which were asked to pledge
 - a pledge-plus-publicity group, which got the pledge but who were told that if they donated their names would be put up in a public place.





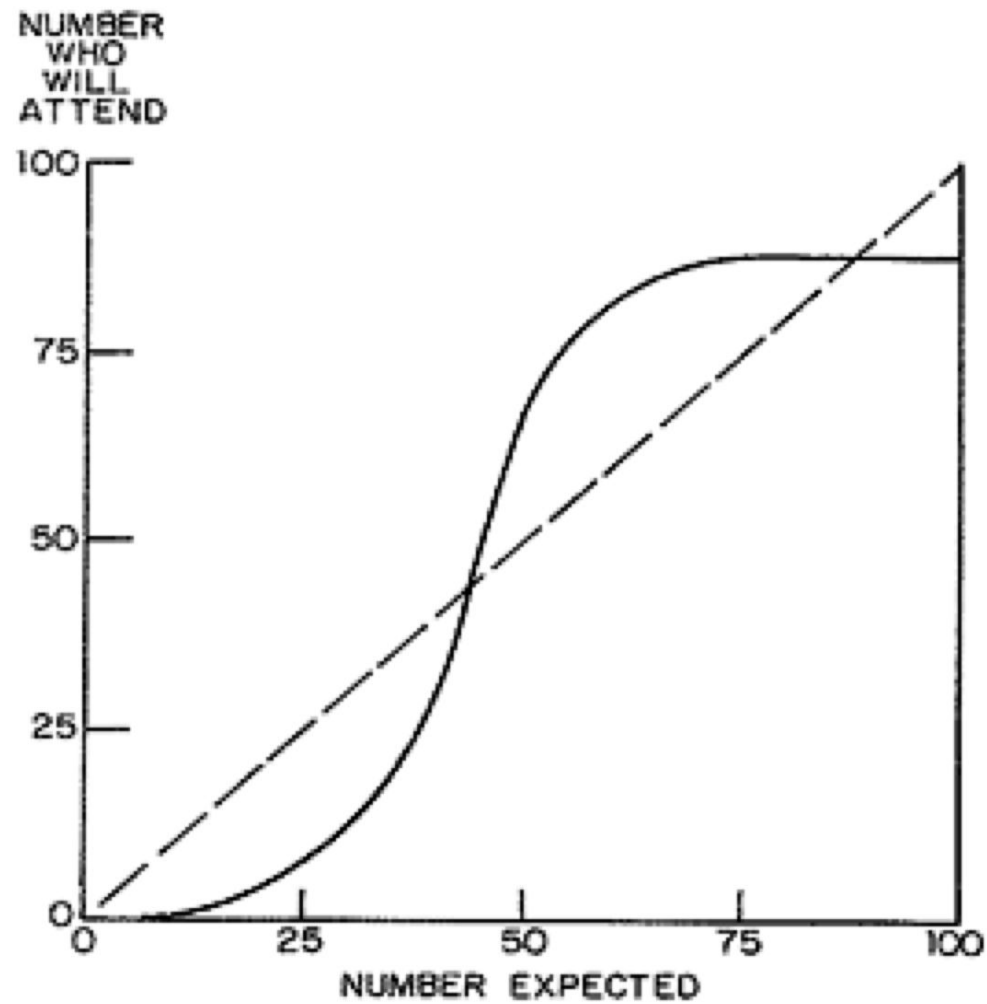
Book Donations

	Control Group	Pledge Group	Pledge & Publicity Group
Book donation	282 (7.2%)	320 (8.1%)	346 (8.8%)
No book donation	3665 (92.8%)	3617 (91.9%)	3592 (91.2%)
Total no. of households	3937	3937	3938

Mechanism: social information

- **Social information:** which will have varying influence depending upon individual's threshold ('k')
- **Chain reactions:** communication about collective action takes place virally via online networks, rather than broadcast

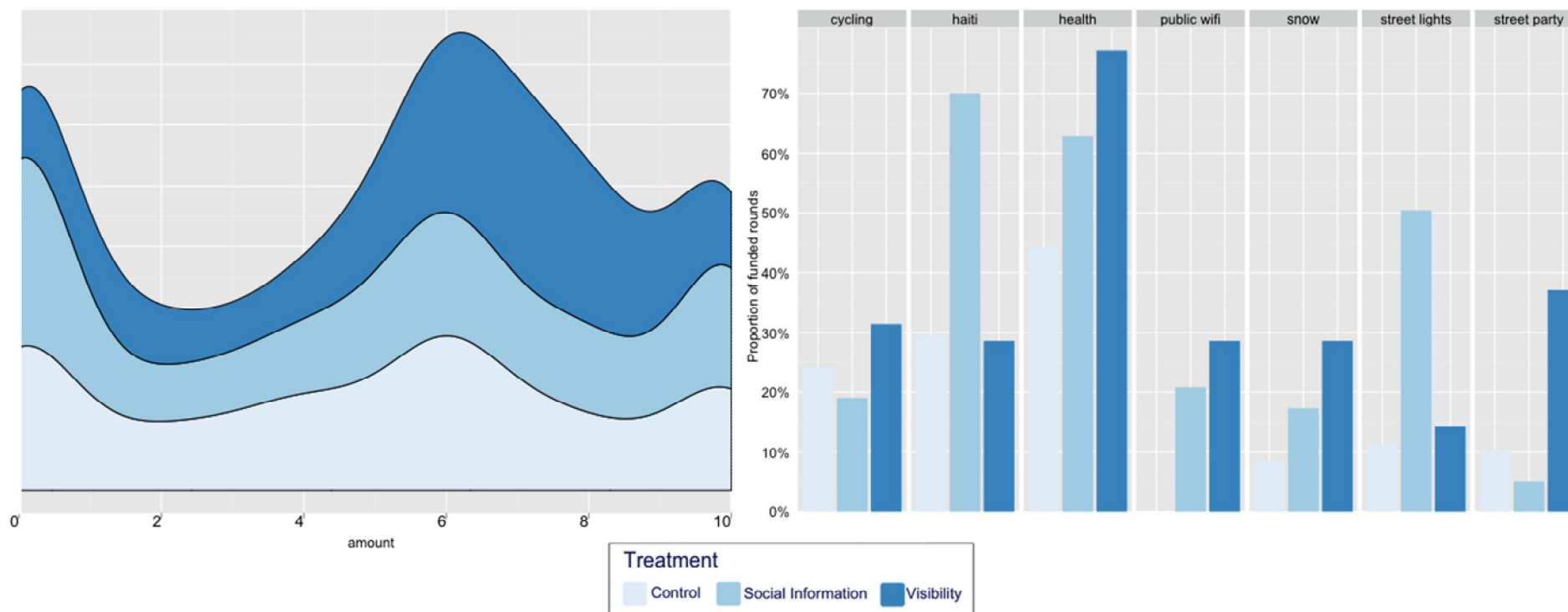
Relationship between participation and expected participation according to Schelling (2006: 104)



Testing two mechanisms: visibility and social information

- Public goods game where members are asked to contribute to the collective good at a cost and receive a higher return if the number of participants is higher than a determined point.
- We recruited 185 subjects to the OxLAB laboratory. At each round ($n=28$), subjects are shown a step-level public good scenario phrased as a request to fund a local initiative.
- Subjects have 10 tokens and are informed about the provision point (60 tokens) and the number of participants in their group ($N = 10$).
- If the provision point is met, a fixed bonus is redistributed amongst all participants.
- Groups of 10 are randomly allocated at each round, so that players never interact with the same exact same group.
- Randomised games into control, visibility and social information

How the treatments affect contributions



Conclusions

- Publicity works - and is powerful
- But it really matters what mechanisms it depends on
- Social pressure tends to demean the individual, but is very powerful
- Recognition is a better form of social pressure, but maybe weaker
- Social information is best as it assumes citizens (correctly) are smart, but is less powerful
- Policy-makers should invest in means to get citizens to use social information more efficiently