

THE LOVE NUDGE: NUDGE ECONOMICS, ERODING TRUST AND NEOLIBERAL FORMS OF INITIMATE SURVEILLANCE

Pip Burkett

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Imagine an app that could outsource the labour in your relationship, that would helpfully remind you to do nice things, tell you how your partner feels and track your progress. In an era where data is increasingly captured, we are surveilled in ever more ways and pointedly in desiring to relinquish our data, privacy, autonomy and agency are forfeited in banal ways: what does this mean for relationships?

In this essay I will analyse Dr. Gary Chapman's 'Love Nudge for Couples' app, asking: whilst the app purports to do one thing, what does it really contribute to? I open by contextualising 'Love Nudge' with George Bataille's writing on 'the secret of the lovers'. If Bataille theorizes relationships as a space where 'non-knowledge' is inhabited through trust, what happens if it becomes surveilled, monitored and tracked? The 'Love Nudge' claims to make the unknowable, knowable. Analysing the app's advertisement, I pick out a number of claims that I work to problematize: that "the app is completely free", "it will change the way you experience love" and it will "improve your relationship one nudge at a time". Using Michel Foucault's text on discipline societies, I explain how the app enacts methods relating to disciplinary methods of surveillance. Turning to Shoshanna Zuboff's explanation of 'surveillance capitalism' I unpick the falsity of the app being "free". Bringing this into dialogue with André Lemos and Elias Bitencourt's text on the wearable technology 'Fitbit' I discuss the claim it will "change the way you experience love", arguing it creates a new subjectivity. Consequently I contextualise the app's language of 'nudging' through 'nudge economics', arguing this is used to reduce individuals' autonomy. Finally, revisiting Bataille I argue these systems work on the premise of making the unknowable knowable through a form of policing that undermines the very thing they purport to be building: trust.

Political theorist David Hancock's 2018 text 'The Politics of the Hidden Space: George Bataille and Non-knowledge in the Era of Transparency' analyses George Bataille's writing on the 'secret of the lovers' as one way of inhabiting what Bataille terms 'non-knowledge' which resists the logic of surveillance¹. Contextualising Bataille in the

¹ David Hancock, "The Politics of the Hidden Space and Non-knowledge in the Era of Transparency," In *Spaces of Crisis and Critique*, ed. Anthony Faramelli, David Hancock, Rob White, (London: Bloomsbury 2018).

current “regime of transparency”² where surveillance is not only rife but privacy is increasingly depoliticized and voluntarily discarded, Hancock scrutinizes how “vast amounts of personal information are now willingly shared.” Desire to share, Hancock argues, is constructed through the neoliberal logic of transparency, where “being open in this sense is taken as a sign of one’s respectability while closing one’s self off from the public gaze is to attract curiosity and suspicion”³.

Hancock argues against the dangers of transparency: how it neutralizes political decisions, undermining democracy which “removes the possibility of resistance”⁴. Suspending the assumptions Bataille makes of marriage, the lovers are theorized as a “space that we can remove ourselves from neoliberal reason, and the regime of digital transparency”⁵. For Bataille, love “is only possible... as excess”, which goes beyond “useful” and makes lovers “an end to themselves”. Resisting capital’s commodification through self-sufficient love⁶, they present a way of “inhabiting the secret”⁷. The right to keep a secret, Hancock argues, is fundamental to democracy within an era that encourages individuals to share⁸. Abandoning privacy turns it from a valued right into something banal, where sharing is seen through connectivity which makes losing privacy – and surveillance – worth the “pay-off”⁹. Though, secrets can be utilised by either end of the political spectrum¹⁰. The lovers evade the logic of transparency by “being both open and opaque” and by accepting their mutual lack of knowledge – that they can never fully know each other’s secrets¹¹. This is fundamentally built on trust, and it is this that works in opposition to transparency.

Enter here the ‘Love Nudge’. Advertised to help “intentional commitment over time” for busy modern couples, the app tracks, set goals, and nudges by explicitly placing the relationship’s inner-workings under surveillance¹². Or in Hancock’s terms, attempting to make the unknowable, knowable. In this essay I show how ‘Love Nudge’, it’s false

² Hancock, “Hidden Space,” 105.

³ Ibid, 105-106.

⁴ Ibid, 112.

⁵ Ibid, 106.

⁶ Ibid, 122-123.

⁷ Ibid, 126.

⁸ Ibid, 115.

⁹ Ibid, 108.

¹⁰ Ibid, 115.

¹¹ Ibid, 123.

¹² “Love Nudge for Couples,” Google Play, accessed 20 April 2019, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.grootersproductions.challenge&hl=en_GB.

claims and the larger context it reflects and contributes to, is indeed political. Released in 2018, 'Love Nudge' is an app for couples which aims to improve relationships using several mechanisms¹³. The app is a digital iteration of Dr Gary Chapman's 1992 best-selling book 'The 5 Love Languages'¹⁴. Taking the 'love languages' quiz, couples discover what 'language' their partner communicates in¹⁵. Couples then set goals for each other, nudge one another to fulfil tasks like "eye contact while talking", and update their 'love tank' indicating on a scale of 0-100% "how loved you are feeling today"¹⁶.

In the one-minute YouTube advertisement 'Love Nudge for Couples' two interracial heterosexual couples bemoan their difficulty in connecting alongside big-band music, which overlay text reveals results from speaking different 'love languages'¹⁷. As the short narrative progresses, a sleek shiny mobile phone emerges with a suggestive trumpet note: an implied answer to all the protagonists' problems. Consequently, one couple rejoices in a hug, the male partner locking eyes with the camera grinning, whilst his partner faces away. The video implies several ways the app improves relationships. Those claims are, (a) that "the app is completely free", (b) "it's like a fitness app for your relationship", (c) "the app will change the way you see relationships" and ultimately, (d) that the app will "improve your relationship one nudge at a time"¹⁸. The music and happy couples build an image of a handy app that segues an age-old problem - men and women supposedly speaking different languages - in a modern way. The advertisement's big-band music is particularly peculiar choice. The soundtrack to the golden age of cinema, the dissonant music is a specific phenomenon of the interwar period¹⁹; an unquestionably commercial music during economic and social crisis, where "people [were] dancing as they never danced before, in a happy rebound from the austerities of war"²⁰. Despite the visuals and claims of 'Love Nudge', the music unmask where its loyalties lie: commercialism. Many of the mechanisms

¹³ Google Play, "Love Nudge,".

¹⁴ Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishers, 1995).

¹⁵ Google Play, "Love Nudge,".

¹⁶ Moody Publishers, "Love Nudge," Apple App Store, Vers. 3.13.0 (2019), accessed 16 April 2019, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/5-love-languages/id495326842?mt=8>.

¹⁷ Gary Chapman, "Love Nudge For Couples," YouTube Video, 1:00, 11 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iVxDY0ihOo>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James Chapman, "A Short History of the Big Band Musical," In *Film's Musical Moments*, ed. Ian Conrich, Estella Tincknell, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

²⁰ Ibid, 29.

'Love Nudge' proports to use to connect couples act in ways relating to what Michel Foucault calls 'a disciplinary society'²¹. I turn to Foucault's work to consider this before dismantling each of the claims in turn.

Philosopher Michel Foucault's 1975 text 'Panopticon' outlines the disciplinary model of surveillance using examples of the plague-stricken town and Jeremy Bentham's panopticon²². The panopticon is a system of surveillance operating through spatial separation within the prison's enclosed space and "permanent registration" which maintains the invisibility of those watching²³. The prison is organised to instil an uncertainty where the prisoners, unable to discern when they are and aren't being watched, feel they are watched continuously.²⁴ Importantly, this becomes internalised - the prisoners self-regulate²⁵. This disciplinary model works then as "correct training"²⁶. The panopticon is understood to be a "diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form"²⁷ rather than a building, although panopticon-design prisons have been built - an example being Cuba's Presidio Modelo²⁸.

For 'Love Nudge' herein lies two vital concepts, one being "visibility is a trap", the other is of binary relationships - functional/dysfunctional as a construction analogous to the order/disorder binary.²⁹ The visibility the panoptical system works through undermines Bataille's model of secrecy, threatening the component of trust and intimacy that is essential within relationships³⁰. As Hancock writes, transparency is "a method for individuals to police each other through a generalized panopticism"³¹. Differentiating between Foucault's panopticon, which exploits the prisoner's assumption "regarding the presence of surveillance, despite not seeing it", Hancock outlines the panopticon in digital form, which evolves "the hyper-real into something that convinces users of

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Pantheon, 1977) 216.

²² Foucault, "Panopticism,".

²³ Ibid, 196-207.

²⁴ Ibid, 206.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 198.

²⁷ Ibid, 205.

²⁸ Asa Mittman, "The Panopticon. Google Earth, Omnipotence and Earthly Delights," *Literature Compass*, 9, no. 12 (December 2012): 938-954.

²⁹ Foucault, "Panopticism," 198-200

³⁰ Hancock, "Hidden Space," 125.

³¹ Ibid, 112.

its non-existence”³². If the panopticon is the “utopia of the perfectly governed city”³³ then ‘Love Nudge’ is a step towards the ‘utopia’ of the governed relationship within a digital panopticon. Foucault and Hancock show the methods that ‘Love Nudge’ employs i.e. nudges and goals, are not just a form of surveillance, but of behaviour regulation³⁴. Furthermore, the app constructs an idea of a functional relationship, without it being clear who has set this ideal, and why. The app attempts to cohere the multiplicity of a dysfunctional relationship into speaking different ‘love languages’³⁵. Seemingly benign systems within the app construct ideal ways to communicate, measure functionality (as if such a thing should or could be measured) and formulate expert sets of knowledges for relationships³⁶. The app captures information and works to normalise certain behaviours, confined within the app’s boundaries and possibly Dr Chapman’s theory. But unlike a book which can be put away and left to gather dust, the addictive nature of ‘gamified’ technologies gives a narrow set of normative rules a better chance to become pervasive. In this way, ‘Love Nudge’ works through the ideology of a disciplinary society³⁷. The recent role of “Social Credits” in China, based on surveillance of online behaviour, shows how such an ideology of a disciplinary society can transformed into an automated punitive system³⁸, the digital panopticon made real. Turning to Shoshana Zuboff I consider the claim that the app is “free”³⁹.

Surveillance theorist Shoshana Zuboff’s 2016 article ‘Google as Fortune Teller: The Secrets of Surveillance Capitalism’ explains how complex structures utilised by ‘big-data’ and tech companies coalesce in what Zuboff terms ‘surveillance capitalism’⁴⁰. Surveillance capitalism describes how many services set themselves up as being as free⁴¹. In reality, they aren’t. What is being exchanged for the use of these services is data, where “[users] are the source of free raw material that feeds a new kind of

³² Ibid, 108.

³³ Foucault, “Panopticism,” 198.

³⁴ Foucault, “Panopticism,” 205.

³⁵ Moody Publishers, “Love Nudge,”.

³⁶ Hancock, “Hidden Space,” 114.

³⁷ Foucault, “Panopticism,”.

³⁸ Fan Liang, Vishnupriya Das, Nadiya Kostyuk, Muzammil Hussain, “Constructing a Data-Driven Society: China’s Social Credit System as a State Surveillance Infrastructure,” *Policy and Internet* 10, no. 4 (August 2018): 415-453.

³⁹ “Love Nudge,” YouTube Video.

⁴⁰ Shoshana Zuboff, “Google as Fortune Teller: The Secrets of Surveillance Capitalism,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 March 2016, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/the-digital-debate/shoshana-zuboff-secrets-of-surveillance-capitalism-14103616.html>.

⁴¹ Zuboff, “Google as Fortune Teller,”.

manufacturing process”⁴². Zuboff charts the ubiquity of data-tracking⁴³ with Google’s rise to tech giant after realising data from search terms could be sold to companies for advertising and surveillance⁴⁴. Working by collecting mass data to identify patterns and outliers in behaviour, “the game is selling access to the real-time flow of your daily life - your reality - in order to directly influence and modify your behaviour for profit”⁴⁵. ‘Love Nudge’ is free to download but requires permissions to use, including: “take pictures and videos”, “modify or delete” SD card contents, collect “location data”, view “your online activities over time”, providing transparent access to many aspects of couples’ lives⁴⁶. The app also “may contain links to other independent third-party websites” which are “provided solely as a convenience to our visitors”, opening up many personalisation opportunities like advertisements relating to user’s goals⁴⁷.

The claim that the ‘Love Nudge’ is “completely free”⁴⁸ is false, as users exchange their data to use the app, sitting it comfortably within the ‘surveillance capitalism’ that Zuboff works to critique and denaturalise⁴⁹. As a system of surveillance, it provides a logical extension of capitalism into the relationship’s intimate space⁵⁰. The stakes here are high, not only included an increased risk to intimate data⁵¹ but to processes of democracy, autonomy and subjectivity⁵². ‘Love Nudge’ is the tip of the proverbial iceberg, which stretches into troubling territory. One example is Grindr’s data breach, exploited by the Egyptian government to locate and arrest gay individuals⁵³. A further ‘Love Nudge’ claim is to be a “fitness app for your relationship” that will “change the way you experience love”⁵⁴. Since the app makes the analogy with a fitness app, I turn to Fitbit to discuss this representation.

Theorists André Lemos and Elias Bitencourt’s 2017 article on Fitbit, ‘I feel my wrist buzz. Smartbody and performative sensibility in Fitbit devices’ illuminates how smart

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Google Play, “Love Nudge,”.

⁴⁷ Moody Publishers, “Privacy Policy,” last modified 17 May 2018, <https://www.moodypublishers.com/privacy-policy/>.

⁴⁸ “Love Nudge,” YouTube Video.

⁴⁹ Zuboff, “Google as Fortune Teller,”.

⁵⁰ Karen E.C. Levy, “Intimate Surveillance,” *Idaho Law Review*, 51, no. 3, (April 2015): 679-93.

⁵¹ Ibid, 691.

⁵² Roger McNamee, *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe*, (London: Penguin Press, 2019).

⁵³ Levy, “Intimate Surveillance,” 691-692.

⁵⁴ “Love Nudge,” YouTube Video.

technology moulds subjectivity, questioning the norms set and regulated by Fitbit⁵⁵. Fitbit is a wearable band that tracks user's steps, providing users with daily step goals, employing a method of regulation inextricable from what Lemos and Bitencourt's term 'algorithmic governmentality'⁵⁶. The article highlights important problems becoming common to technologies that track, monitor, set goals and therefore regulate. Worse, Fitbit, as a wearable technology, is an 'Internet of Things' device where issues of privacy and regulation become more acute as physical objects play an increasing part in monitoring and policing behaviour⁵⁷.

These issues are three-fold: firstly, the utilization of data in regulating behaviour, which results in an "algorithmic subjectivity"⁵⁸. Secondly, as another technology of measurement, it mediates and depoliticizes technologies of measurement. Thirdly, gamifying reward systems raises ethical issues, not least around users' self-identification with the term "addict"⁵⁹. Coining the term 'smart body' to describe the subjectivity associated with wearable technology⁶⁰, Lemos and Bitencourt further tie Fitbit's technologies of capture and mediation to Zuboff's 'surveillance capitalism', calling it 'algorithmic governmentality'⁶¹. Analysing community forums, Lemos and Bitencourt outline the changes Fitbit users experience and share⁶². Poignantly they write about "extreme behaviours, physical limits defined by system goals and quantification habits without utilizing the device", seen in changes of user's habits, defining their physical limits according to Fitbit's limits⁶³.

Whilst only Fitbit utilises sensory feedback, both Fitbit and 'Love Nudge' generate demands for actions and rewards via completion of goals. This works to "shape subjectivity" where actions and behaviours - in exercise or relationship - are guided by the algorithmic prescription of an app⁶⁴. 'Love Nudge', like Fitbit, takes advantage of

⁵⁵ Elias Bitencourt, André Luiz Martins Lemos, "I feel my wrist buzz. Smartbody and performative sensibility in Fitbit devices," in *Galáxia (São Paulo)*, September 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1982-2554232919>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

the supposed objectivity of mediated data produced by algorithms⁶⁵. By claiming to measure and represent something as complex as feeling loved on a scale of 0-100%, 'Love Nudge' render the immeasurable visible. This brings to mind the disturbing and dystopian app Sexfit, a Wi-Fi connected device that tells a wearer "whether to slow down or speed up your thrusting"⁶⁶. Suffice to say tracking 'success' of sexual encounters by thrusts, endurance and in other sex apps by "moans"⁶⁷ is not only reductive, creating an "algorithmic subjectivity"⁶⁸, but also disciplinary⁶⁹. 'Love Nudge' transfers agency from couples to the app, as Hancock states, "our understanding of that subjectivity is unless we understand data, always mediated and controlled"⁷⁰. Fitbit user's self-identification as 'Fitbit addicts' where they "not only identify with addictive behaviours... but also consider them to be healthy and productive"⁷¹ are striking considering the language of 'Love Nudge'. Like 'Love Nudge', Fitbit gamifies incentives to encourage engagement. Where does this cross over to addiction, and more importantly what happens to self-motivation when participation is increasingly gamified? The claim that 'Love Nudge' will "change the way that you think about relationships"⁷² is true, but not necessarily for the better. Thinking here of Ira Levin's brilliant novel 'The Stepford Wives'; with the 'Love Nudge', one could imagine the harm of a data-driven mentality to achieving goals within a relationship, undermining the meaning of gestures that mean to 'improve' the relationship⁷³. This leads me to Nudge economics to consider these questions reflect on the app's mechanisms.

Nudge economics is a concept invented by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein⁷⁴. Nudge involves changing the 'choice architecture' of decisions so instead of limiting the number of choices a person has, they are steered towards selected options seemingly of their own volition⁷⁵. The ideology behind nudge economics presents a dichotomy whereby it claims to be founded on liberal economy principals of democracy

⁶⁵ Philip E. Agre, "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy," *Information Society*, 10, no. 2 (January 1994):101–127.

⁶⁶ Levy, "Intimate Surveillance," 683.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 688.

⁶⁸ Bitencourt, Lemos, "I feel my wrist buzz,".

⁶⁹ Foucault, "Panopticism".

⁷⁰ Hancock, "Hidden Space," 110.

⁷¹ Bitencourt, Lemos, "I feel my wrist buzz,".

⁷² "Love Nudge," YouTube Video.

⁷³ Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).

⁷⁴ Richard Thaler, Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, (London: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

and freedom of choice, but arguably uses coercive tactics that harm the autonomy of people's decision-making processes in the long run⁷⁶. Legal theorist David Campbell's 2017 review of David Halpern's book 'Inside the Nudge Unit' underscores the ethical contradictions present in nudge economics⁷⁷. Campbell charts nudge's history from 'Strategy Unit' to 'Behavioural Insights Team', later called 'Nudge Unit', under David Cameron⁷⁸. Campbell's critiques the contradiction within Thaler and Sunstein's philosophy of "Libertarian Paternalism" which underpins 'nudge'⁷⁹. Campbell describes "the outright celebration of the potential to manipulate" towards a particular choice⁸⁰. Campbell argues any intervention, even ones designed to maximise happiness, are coercive and "truly robust cases should have to be made to justify them"⁸¹. Campbell adds, "recognition of this is precisely what's missing from nudge"⁸². The reason being that "legality requires that laws be clearly expressed commands so that citizens can respond to them rationally"⁸³. Campbell criticizes Halpern who warns Nudge units to "stay well away from Orwell's vision", where George Orwell's totalitarianism requires citizens to act as the state desires whilst "also requires them to believe in those commands"⁸⁴. Whereas for Halpern this relates more to Aldous Huxley, writing, "nudging requires citizen to act in accordance with the commands of the state without even knowing what the commands are", highlighting the vast difference between coercion and manipulation⁸⁵. Campbell's pithy critique of libertarian paternalism is that "nudging does not treat citizens as children; it treats them as mugs"⁸⁶. Nudge economics that implement hidden design choices and gamify reward mechanisms directly contradicts the legal need for written laws so citizens may discuss, refute and impact them. The impact of 'Love Nudge' using the rhetoric of 'nudge' is troubling. Not only in creating subjects of reduced autonomy, but in gamifying romantic behaviour, which quashes any possibility of intimacy.

⁷⁶ David Campbell, "Cleverer Than Command?: Review of David Halpern, Inside the Nudge Unit," *Social & Legal Studies* 26, no. 1, (February 2017):111–126.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 113.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 120-121.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 122.

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid, 122-123.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 123,

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Through contextualising the claims made by 'Love Nudge' I have shown the app is indicative of present-day surveillance capitalism, working on the principles of disciplinary societies. Whilst the app is not free, it may change how users think about relationships. That thinking will be defined by the app's boundaries and motivated by the desire to fulfil goals rather than intrinsically motivated. It too may improve relationships one nudge at a time, however nudging is all too easily unethical, potentially creating subjects of reduced autonomy. To bring this back to Bataille, the lovers fundamentally work through trust, accepting that the other cannot fully know their experiences of love are the same. 'Love Nudge' works to make this secret, this non-knowledge, not only visible and known but logical and quantifiable through the use of data and goals. As Hancock writes, "transparency is necessitated by the understanding of the human within modernity which presupposes a breakdown of trust". The technology starts from the false promise that all can be known, that to not know equates to 'lack'. It offers a false promise of trust that instead works on the logic of capitalism. As Hancock writes "boxes can be opened but with them, there are only more boxes"⁸⁷. It should come as no surprise that quantification, surveillance and behaviour regulation has extended itself into the realm of intimacy. We can, and should, ask more from our intimate relationships. To embrace the unknown and "inhabit non-knowledge"⁸⁸ here is profound. The question that really needs to be asked is who dictates the norm for these apps that modulate behaviour? And what happens to autonomy if we are increasingly relying on the gamified feedback of the nudge to engage?

⁸⁷ Hancock, "Hidden Space," 121.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 122.

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