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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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Editing Out Unsustainable Behavior

Michael Maniates

By late 2010, Australians are going to have a hard time finding an incandescent bulb for their nightstand lamps or desk lights. The Australian government, troubled by potential electricity shortages and global climate change, is the first to “ban the bulb” in favor of energy-sipping compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) and LEDs. The impact will be significant: 4 million fewer tons of greenhouse gas emissions each year by 2012, together with sizable economic savings. And Australia is not alone. The European Union is slowly phasing out incandescents by 2012. Canada, Indonesia, and even the United States are next in line.¹

Environmental analysts like Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute are delighted. Brown says that if everyone followed Australia’s lead “the worldwide drop in electricity use would permit the closing of more than 270 coal-fired (500 megawatt) power plants. For the United States, this bulb switch would facilitate shutting down 80 coal-fired plants.” But others are not so sure. Reports abound of people hoarding incandescent bulbs in Australia and Germany, among other countries, and some experts wonder if incandescents are being forced out too quickly. And then there is the

prickly philosophical question at the heart of it all: Should products be removed from the menu of consumer choice because of their environmental or other socially objectionable qualities? Who decides what stays on the shelves and what goes? Shouldn’t the consumer be allowed to choose freely? Is “lightbulb fascism” intruding into the marketplace?²

Choice Editing Is Nothing New

Welcome to the world of “choice editing,” where the tussle over lightbulbs is but the opening salvo in a larger struggle to crowd out environmentally negative products in favor of more benign choices. Choice editing for sustainability is more than simply deleting what does not work. In the words of the U.K. Sustainable Development Council, it “is about shifting the field of choice for mainstream consumers: cutting out unnecessarily damaging products and getting real sustainable choices on the shelves.” (See Box 16 for some initiatives on sustainable consumption at the international level.)³

Choice editors remove environmentally offensive products from commercial consid-

Michael Maniates is Professor of Political Science and Environmental Science at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania.

Box 16. The U.N. Marrakech Process on Sustainable Consumption and Production

In recognition of their disproportionate share of global consumption and the resulting impact on sustainability and equality, industrial countries agreed in 2002 to take the lead in accelerating the shift toward sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

To achieve this, a global informal multi-stakeholder expert process was launched in 2003 in Marrakech, Morocco, to support regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift to sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and to elaborate a 10-year framework of programs on SCP, which will begin after its structure and content are negotiated at the U.N. Commission on Sustainable Development meeting in May 2011.

A key element of the Marrakech Process is its seven Task Forces, which are voluntary initiatives led by governments in cooperation with various partners:

- **Sustainable Lifestyles** (Sweden). Identifies and compares grassroots social innovations for sustainability from around the world, finds promising examples, and diffuses

them. Develops train-the-trainer tools for sustainable consumption in youth, CD-roms on sustainability in marketing, and on-line galleries of sustainability communication. Projects implemented in more than 30 countries with materials in over 10 languages.

- **Cooperation with Africa** (Germany). Affirms Africa's own 10-year framework on SCP (the first region to have developed and launched such a program) by supporting an All Africa Eco-Labeling scheme, the establishment of a network of Life-Cycle Assessment experts in Africa, and initiatives to "leapfrog" straight into clean energy sources.
- **Sustainable Public Procurement** (Switzerland). Develops analysis and Web-based Status Assessment tools to support public-sector organizations' attempts to justify, develop, and gauge the success of sustainable procurement programs.
- **Sustainable Products** (United Kingdom). Catalyzes networks of experts in key product areas to upwardly revise standards, develop labels, work together on policy roadmaps,

eration, like smog-producing charcoal lighter fluid in Los Angeles or leaded gasoline in Europe and North America. Or they make such products expensive to use, like Ireland's levy on plastic shopping bags, which has reduced plastic bag use by 90 percent. But like any good editor, choice editors cannot just chop. They must offer options or, at the very least—in the words of environmental reporter Leo Hickman—a sufficiently compelling illusion of choice. In Los Angeles, backyard cooks denied their lighter fluid had the choice of chimney or electric briquette fire starters. In Ireland, shoppers can purchase any number of cloth bags, some trendy or stylish. And in Australia and the growing number of other countries looking to edit out incandescents, consumers will see more choice

among CFLs, LEDs, and other innovative lighting technologies.⁴

If the idea of governmental choice editing rankles, perhaps because it sounds manipulative or too "Big Brother," remember that choice editing is neither new nor novel. Government has long been at it, in ways both obvious and obscure. (See Table 8.) Safety and performance standards for everything from the food people eat to the cars they drive constrain and shape choice. The same holds true for tax, tariff, and subsidy policies that heighten the desirability of some products while making others unattractive or unavailable. More subtly, government decisions about where to build roads and rail lines, what schools and hospitals are constructed or closed, and which research and development initiatives are supported or

Box 16. *continued*

and collaborate on compliance. Three product areas identified so far: lighting, home entertainment products, and electric motors.

- **Sustainable Tourism** (France). Creates demand for greener travel offerings with the *Green Passport Program* for citizens, fosters industry supply with the revised *Environmental and Sustainable Tourism Teaching Pack for the Hospitality Industry*, and encourages investment by convening a Sustainable Investment and Finance in Tourism Network.
- **Sustainable Buildings and Construction** (Finland). Works to move green building standards beyond the realm of the voluntary by developing policy recommendations and working in partnership with national governments and private firms participating in the U.N. Sustainable Buildings and Climate Initiative.
- **Education for Sustainable Consumption** (Italy). Focuses on integrating sustainable consumption into core curriculum in the Mediterranean region, while working with the UNESCO Associate Schools Network Project

(a global network of 8,500 educational institutions in 179 countries founded in 1953) to disseminate best practices in sustainability education to teachers around the world.

By bringing consumption into the global dialogue on sustainability, the Marrakech Process raises questions of lifestyle, values, and progress, creating a unique space within national governments and regional forums for reforming the cultures and institutions at the basis of all socioeconomic systems, while bringing a suite of tools to the table for policymakers who are serious about greening the economy and improving human well-being.

Clearly more could be done with greater leverage and resources. Unfortunately, the low profile of the Marrakech Process means the effort suffers from a lack of serious attention by senior decisionmakers. In the run-up to the negotiations in May 2011, this fledgling but transformative U.N. process could be helped by the greater involvement of governments, the private sector, and the public.

—Stefanie Bowles

Source: See endnote 3.

starved converge to write the menu for housing, education, and jobs from which everyone must choose.

The real worry is not that government engages in choice editing. Rather, it is that for decades such editing has aided and abetted an especially narrow view of progress, one that imagines mass consumption as the foundation of human happiness, egalitarianism, and even democracy itself. As prize-winning historian Elizabeth Cohen writes in *Consumers' Republic*, “A strategy...emerged after the Second World War for reconstructing the [U.S.] economy and reaffirming its democratic values through promoting the expansion of mass consumption.” A central plank of this strategy was to make energy-intensive, resource-depleting,

mass-consuming choices appear natural and inevitable: witness the single-family, detached home to be filled with products, a family car to get to it, and dispersed and abundant shopping outlets. Other, more environmentally sustainable consumption options and patterns—efficient streetcar and intercity rails systems, for instance, or a returnable-bottle network for milk, soda, and other products—were cast as backward, were made more difficult to find or rely upon, and subsequently disappeared.⁵

Cohen’s incisive gaze rests on the United States, but similar stories hold true for much of the industrial world, and parallel tales are now being told in developing countries, most notably India and China. They all point to a provocative question: if the rise of fundamen-

Table 8. Examples and Features of Choice Editing

Types of Choice Editing	Examples	Important Features
Eliminate offending choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Montreal Protocol and CFCs • Shift away from leaded petrol in the North America and Europe • Ban on incandescent bulbs in Australia • Compressed natural gas for public transportation in India • Walmart's decision to carry only MSC-certified wild-caught fresh and frozen fish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong legislation, often supported by business interests • Requires new choices to offset the loss of previous choices • Demands a "phase-in" period that allows for adjustment
Slowly trim away the worst products and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan's "top runner" program for energy efficiency • LEED building requirements in the United States, which gradually increase the standards for certifying a new building as "green" or "sustainable" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of labeling to identify, over time, the most offending practices and products • Clear standards and methods of evaluation • Collaborations among government, industry, and consumer groups
Make offending choices less attractive or increasingly difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ireland's levy on plastic shopping bags • Shifting fatty and processed foods from eye level to higher or lower shelves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two primary instruments: taxation and product placement and positioning • Wide range of choice is retained, but incentives and positioning privilege sustainable choices over unsustainable ones
Change context for choices; alter "choice architecture"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative use of defaults (for instance, consumers are subscribed to renewable forms of electricity and must intentionally refuse this option) • Focused changes to material flows; for university and corporate composting programs, for example, shift to all compostable dining ware (plates and utensils) in cafeterias to eliminate mixing of compostable and non-compostable waste by consumers • Embedded cues and drivers that encourage reduced consumption (for example, when trays in university cafeterias are removed, students take only what they need, reducing food waste, water use, and energy consumption) • Create real choice for trading leisure for income: four fifths work for four fifths pay as a viable work option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enduring question: How can consumer experience be structured so that doing the right thing is natural and requires little or no thought while doing the wrong thing is difficult and requires conscious thought and focused intent • Building a choice architecture to oppose consumerism often involves reintroducing meaningful choice: choices among varied transportation options, for example, or about work time and leisure

tally unsustainable consumer cultures was facilitated by choice editing—by an elite who intently shifted the field of choice for mainstream consumers—will transforming consumerism into something more sustainable require a similar degree of determination and sophistication by government and business?

The answer appears to be yes. In 2006, for example, the Sustainable Development Roundtable (SDR)—a project of the Sustainable Development Commission and the National Consumer Council in the United Kingdom—released an analysis of 19 promising transformations in consumer cultures, ranging from sustainable forestry products to fair-trade and organic food product lines. SDR concluded that “historically, the green consumer has not been the tipping point in driving green innovation. Instead, choice editing for quality and sustainability by government and business has been the critical driver in the majority of cases. Manufacturers, retailers and regulators have made decisions to edit out less sustainable products on behalf of consumers, raising the standard for all.”⁶

A classic example of this is the Montreal Protocol’s phaseout of ozone-destroying chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). “Powerful economic, political, and technical factors combined to facilitate the phase-out of CFCs,” write James Maxwell and Sanford Weiner of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They note that a critical factor was DuPont’s desire to create new consumer demand for its CFC substitute while establishing a competitive advantage over its major global competitor, which had no such substitutes. The ozone layer is healthier today because consumers shifted to more ozone-friendly substitutes, but this shift came about largely because of methodical choice editing that pushed consumers in that direction.⁷

Of course, consumers still have an important role to play as they vote for sustainability with their purchases. But Tim Lang of City

University London, who coined the idea of “food miles,” speaks for many analysts of sustainable consumption when he asks “why should the consumer be the one left in the supermarket aisle to agonize over complex issues such as animal welfare, carbon footprints, workers’ rights and excessive packaging, often without any meaningful data on the label to inform their decision-making?” Why, in other words, don’t producers and governments shift their current choice-editing practices so that consumers choose only among a range of environmentally “good” products? That way, making the right choice is—as businessman and environmental writer Paul Hawken puts it—as “easy as falling off a log.”⁸

One answer is that the favored alternative—labeling products as environmentally “good” or “bad” and letting consumers decide—is sometimes thought to be less controversial. Product labeling is an important component in the transformation of consumer societies to sustainable ones. Yet experience suggests that when product information is made available, perhaps as part of ecolabeling schemes, it influences no more than a minority of shoppers—and not nearly enough, not fast enough, and not consistently enough to drive the transformation of consumer life required by a planet under stress.⁹

At least three factors limit the effectiveness of labeling: the varying degree of environmental commitment among the general population; the complexity of consumer-choice decisions, which are structured by intricate sets of social processes and cultural influences; and a corrosive “choice architecture”—the potent context within which people make decisions. Nutrition labeling, for example, does not stand much of a chance in most supermarkets, given that products are positioned (or hidden) on shelves and at end-of-aisle displays to foster impulse purchases of fatty, sweet, and processed foods and that sugary products are shelved at a child’s eye

level. It is no surprise, then, that the Sustainable Development Commission found that information about the environmental and economic benefits of less environmentally destructive products “failed to get more than a minority of people buying” the best products. But the Commission also found that when labeling and other information efforts were part of choice-editing efforts by government, producers, and retailers, consumer practices changed across the board.¹⁰

ditions and the ability to pay permit. Regardless of their preferences, 20 percent of their electricity will flow from renewable sources by 2010 due to Renewable Portfolio Standards imposed on electric utilities by the state government. These are driving the development of renewables faster than uncoordinated consumer demand ever could. California’s proportion of renewable electricity will slowly grow, and 38 other states are following suit.¹²

In 2003, London implemented Europe’s first “congestion pricing” program for its city core: drivers pay a fee to operate their car in central city areas during peak periods, with the revenue going to boost bus service and fund subway renovations. Initially treated with skepticism, the program now enjoys growing public support and is a model for major cities worldwide. And in India, in response to a Supreme Court public health order, the government has required all buses, taxis, and auto-rickshaws in major cities to switch from dirty fuels to cleaner burning compressed natural gas. Despite some initial protests, New Delhi has led the way, and commuters are now part of an ambitious effort to curb air pollution. These examples, and others like them,

demonstrate the effectiveness and political viability of choice editing.¹³

Business offers its own set of examples, though whether these practices will endure and expand absent government regulation or persistent pressure by citizens’ groups remains to be seen. Reacting to pressure from environmental groups, since 1999 Home Depot—the largest home improvement retailer in the United States—has sold lumber certified and labeled by the Forest Stewardship Council. But it also has quietly altered significant aspects of its wood-product supply chain; it is consequently harder today than 10 years ago for any-



New Delhi traffic jam: less pollution may be only half the battle.

Editing for Sustainability

If the goal is to move consumers toward less environmentally damaging patterns of consumption, contemporary experience says that choice editing delivers. At a growing number of colleges and universities across the United States, for instance, fair-trade coffee and renewably generated electricity are increasingly on the menu—and are often the only choice available on campus.¹¹

In California, consumers can choose from a variety of electricity generation options, and the most environmentally dedicated customers can opt for rooftop solar arrays where site con-

one to purchase environmentally “bad” lumber at Home Depot.¹⁴

B&Q, Home Depot’s counterpart in the United Kingdom, pursued a similar strategy and has perhaps the most robust commercial system in place for certifying the sources of its timber supply, easily outpacing U.S. retailers. Interviewed in the late 1990s, Allen Knight, then Environmental Policy Coordinator for the company, explained that B&Q embarked on sustainable wood “even though there was no indication of consumer demand for certified products.” He observed that “customers do not ask for certified products because they are unaware of them: Raising awareness and creating markets are the retailer’s role.”¹⁵

Not to be outdone, in early 2006 Walmart pledged to source all its wild-caught fresh and frozen fish from suppliers certified as sustainably harvested by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Moreover, it required its suppliers to expand renewable fisheries rather than jockey for access to or ownership of existing suppliers. The blue MSC ecolabel figures prominently on Walmart wild-caught fish, but unlike other labeling schemes the certification is not meant to persuade buyers to choose sustainable wild-caught fish over less sustainable options, as the company has edited those out completely.¹⁶

Also in early 2006 Hannaford Supermarkets in the United States implemented its “guiding star” program in 270 stores, in which products identified as especially healthy or nutritious are given one to three stars. Some 28 percent of items in the stores receive the rating, with the remainder not being good enough to get a star at all. Dan Goleman, author of *Ecological Intelligence*, reports that “poorly rated brands dropped as much as 5 percent in sales,” while sales of some three-star brands went up by 7 percent. “Brand managers started contacting Hannaford to ask what they needed to do to get higher ratings,” Goleman noted.¹⁷

Hannaford’s apparent success comes

because they understood their program as more than a simple labeling exercise. It was about changing critical components of the “choice architecture” at its stores. “It includes signs, shelf tags, an advertising campaign, collateral materials, training materials, a web site, and community outreach, among other elements,” explains Hannaford spokesperson Michael Norton. And it meant changing product placement and shelving strategies to reinforce healthier shopping habits.¹⁸

Obstacles to Change

There remains immense potential for choice editing to drive fundamental changes in consumption. But at least two obstacles stand in the way. One is the persistent belief that product labeling alone can drive necessary change. Even when logical and clear, labeling places the burden on consumers to drive needed social change with their purchasing decisions. It also reinforces what Thomas Princen at the University of Michigan calls one of the most disabling myths about political life: the notion of consumer sovereignty, which says that the decisions that producers and marketers make about what to produce and what to sell is driven solely by independent, uninfluenced consumer choices. The consumer decides, in other words, and the producer responds. This idea denies the power that government and business have over the menu and architecture of consumer choice. In doing so, it undermines the very rationale for choice editing.¹⁹

Japan has pioneered a better use of labeling, one that could move consumer cultures toward an ethos of sustainability. Since 1998 the government has divided products up into similar categories and classes, and then graded and labeled them on a 1–5 scale for energy efficiency. Tiers one and two are the standard set by the best-performing products—and it is the standard that the entire industry must meet within five years. As these “top runners”

improve, the overall standard shifts upward, placing ongoing pressure on manufacturers to improve their product lines or face a ban on their products. In the short run, energy-conscious consumers are empowered: the top-runner label offers important information about the overall energy costs of a consumer choice. In the longer run, the field of choice changes: the label provides a regulatory platform for driving constant product innovation, increasing the range of choice among the higher-performing categories and editing out the worst products. Germany is considering a similar program. Advocates of choice editing hope that Walmart's recent commitment to environmental labeling will incorporate this "top runner policy."²⁰

A second impediment to the power of choice editing is its prevailing focus on "consumption shifting" rather than "consumption reducing." Most choice editing has been about moving consumers to less environmentally damaging products. But genuinely sustainable patterns of consumption must also involve reductions in overall consumption. How can the context within which everyday people make consumption decisions be edited to encourage that? John de Graaf suggests one answer: make it attractive for people to trade work for leisure in ways that would lead to a voluntary reduction in income (but not health and other important benefits) for more free time, which in turn has known environmental benefits.²¹

Cornell economist Robert Frank offers another solution: shift taxes toward luxury consumption, reduce or eliminate taxes on income diverted to savings, and invest more government resources in public uses—parks, inviting pedes-

trian walkways, mass transit—that would reduce individual pressures to consume (thus supporting de Graaf's agenda for less work, less income, but more life satisfaction).²²

In *Nudge*, economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein provide a suite of additional ideas for altering the "choice architecture" in service of sustainable consumption. These include the pervasive use of defaults to "nudge" consumers in environmentally appropriate directions. A person could opt out of these defaults, but the burden rests on the individual to choose the wrong behavior over the right one. Examples include automatic and certified carbon-offsets for all travel bookings, default savings plans, and pricier renewable energy automatically included in residential energy bills (so a customer would have to say explicitly "I want to use dirty, polluting coal to save a small amount of money").²³

Choice editing has been with us a great long while, and it is here to stay. If that seems far-fetched, just bring an especially critical eye to the layout of products and displays in a supermarket. Which products draw customers' eyes? Which are easily reached? The question now is this: Will a primary focus on the promise of product labeling alone (and underlying notions of consumer sovereignty) continue to shape policy for sustainable consumption? Or will more-realistic assessments emerge about how and why people make consumer choices? Government and business, operating from a view that mass consumption means mass prosperity, have tightly held the reins of choice editing for too long. Now is the time for a more nuanced, more sustainable vision of choice and choice architecture to prevail.