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“Overton Window:” Theory

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Abstract: This article highlights the importance of the Overton Window theory in shaping, directing, and managing public opinion—one of the most critical elements in public relations. The author explores this theory through case studies related to media and social issues.

Keywords: Overton Window, public opinion, social engineering, media influence, public relations, agenda setting, opinion management, social perception, framing theory, mass communication.

Introduction: Managing public opinion is a strategic direction in communication, marketing, politics, public relations, and media that enables influence over public views, beliefs, and behaviors. The use of this tool is essential for various reasons—beneficial for some and harmful for others. The question of whether managing public opinion is necessary has been debated since the times of famous thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Below are examples of some of their perspectives on the topic.

Francis Bacon, in his work *The Advancement of Learning*, emphasized the danger of leaving the human mind unattended, as it tends to follow harmful thoughts and ideas.

French philosopher René Descartes, in his work *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, argued that the mind must be trained to think through a disciplined reasoning process that governs it. William Graham Sumner, in his book *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, criticized educational institutions for producing individuals with uniform thinking and beliefs, as if they were coming out of an incubator.

Each of these thinkers presents their own truth based on their arguments.

As members of the societies we live in, we are

continuously exposed to efforts to influence our consciousness through various media resources, products, their packaging, color schemes, stories, and even simple actions—sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly. But as participants and consumers of this influence policy, how aware are we of the process of our minds being managed? Do we know what methods are being used in this control? What are we being made to forget, and what are we being made to internalize? And how beneficial or dangerous are these topics being forgotten or internalized? Do we analyze these processes? Do we monitor them?

This article does not focus on whether managing public consciousness is necessary, but rather on one specific method used in this strategy that has already been widely propagated—the Overton Window theory. The aim is to examine how this theory is applied in society using real-life examples.

Although the American political analyst Joseph Paul Overton frequently expressed his views in the media during his lifetime, these ideas only began to gain widespread recognition after his death. This was due to his colleague at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Joseph Lehman, who summarized Overton's analyses and ideas, dedicating them to his memory under the name "Overton Window" theory.



When analyzing the dangers and nuances of this theory, its primary threat lies in gradually introducing ideas considered marginal by the public and systematically transitioning them into the mainstream. The subtlety of the theory, however, is in convincing society that these marginal ideas are becoming natural through the application of this method.

The implementation of the Overton Window theory consists of several phases: "unthinkable," "radical," "acceptable," "sensible," "popular," and "policy."

The initial stage, "unthinkable", involves demonstrating that there are people who support ideas considered marginal by the public. At this point, an audience sympathetic to the marginal idea is either identified or artificially created and gradually introduced to the public through various media resources. This helps dissolve the societal taboo against discussing the issue. Once the public becomes aware that other perspectives exist, even if they do not agree, they become slightly more open to hearing those views. Thus, advocates of the idea achieve part

of their goal.

The transition from "unthinkable" to "radical" includes drawing attention to the pressure or persecution faced by supporters of the marginal idea. This is done to evoke sympathy and encourage a more tolerant attitude from the general public. In some cases, even legal warnings or actions may be taken against those who oppose the idea too strongly.

In the move from "radical" to "acceptable", prominent public figures begin to either support the idea or treat it as normal. This lends legitimacy to the discourse.

In the "sensible" stage, various scholars enter the scene, presenting research and arguments in favor of the idea's importance and relevance. As a result, the audience gradually expands, and the idea starts to appear as a common reality.

When transitioning from "sensible" to "popular", not only is it unacceptable to oppose the idea, but even slight dissent is met with scorn. Those who express skepticism are portrayed as backward, uneducated, or problematic. Social pressures isolate them, decreasing their numbers and influence.

Finally, in the "policy" stage, efforts begin to legalize the idea. Initially, it might be allowed in exceptional cases. Then, through media campaigns, public demand is fabricated for its universal application. Eventually, universally applicable laws are adopted.

As observed, a well-organized, systematic, and natural-seeming promotion process can easily reprogram public consciousness regarding a specific idea.

The duration of this propaganda process varies depending on the context. For instance, in matters related to religion or belief systems, the process takes longer. In contrast, during emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic, the window shifts more rapidly—as we have witnessed.

METHODOLOGY

If we examine how Russian scholars have studied this theory, we find that L.V. Pisaryev, a docent at the Tikhon Orthodox Humanities University, discussed the Overton Window's role in the erosion of the English national-cultural code through G.K. Chesterton's *The Flying Inn*.

I.A. Yakoba from Irkutsk National Technical University analyzed its application to the promotion of same-sex marriage in the U.S. Prof. A.G. Shilina from the Crimean Federal University examined sexist imagery in city advertisements, while A.A. Budanova discussed the promotion of euthanasia. E.Y. Vasina from N.I. Lobachevsky Nizhny Novgorod State University focused on Scottish independence in the UK. Political scientists S. Volodenkov and S. Fedorchenko from Moscow State University described it as a manipulative matrix of

political management. A.A. Grigoryan from the Russian Presidential Academy emphasized the role of the media in its implementation. V.A. Sicheva and I.G. Golushko explored why this theory is interpreted by some as a myth. R.A. Denisov from Moscow State University of Management critically analyzed it through the lens of framing theory. A.V. Nagornaya and N.A. Butenkova from Surgut State University studied the subjectivity and non-standard features of Friedrich Nietzsche's works through the lens of the Overton Window theory.

European and American scholars have also produced valuable works. M. Dustin, N. Ferreira, and S. Millns from the University of Sussex examined gender perspectives in Brexit. Ph. Henderson, a doctoral student at the University of Toronto, explored resource and fossil capital issues in Canada. B.Z. Szałek from the University of Szczecin discussed propaganda in politics. A.B. Coles from George Mason University studied counterterrorism campaigns through the lens of this theory. O.V. Karpenko analyzed the theoretical foundations of the theory using inductive and deductive methods.

DISCUSSION

Although Uzbekistan has laws and policies on freedom of speech and transparency, public trust in their impartial implementation remains low. For example, only a small portion of crimes committed in the country are disclosed to the public. Observing the actual situation, people assume that the lack of censorship would mean full transparency. While this may seem fair, scholars argue that disclosing all information could lead to chaos. In today's information war era, it is vital for both the media and society to understand the importance of information policy.

Let me illustrate this with an example: an Uzbek blogger named Jasmin, who underwent gender transition, faced immense backlash in the early days of appearing on social media. The public responded with hate and derogatory comments because no similar

cases had previously been publicized in Uzbek media. Over time, however, Jasmin's consistent presence and personal storytelling changed public perception. Today, public figures communicate with and support Jasmin openly, and what was once a marginal identity is now gradually becoming mainstream. As the number of supporters grows, dissenters become less vocal.

Now, some questions:

Have you ever seen someone from the Uzbek community with a gender transition gain such media popularity before?

Based on the Overton Window theory, at which stage do you think this case currently stands?

Most importantly, who can guarantee that laws legalizing gender transition won't be introduced in the future?

As the Russians say, "Slowly but surely", the promotion progresses. Why slowly? Despite laws promoting tolerance, the strong religious values of our people prevent these foreign ideas from gaining traction. That's my personal opinion, of course.

In conclusion, while democracy and openness demand transparency, exposing society to raw, unchecked information—especially morally alien concepts—can desensitize the public. Gradually, even criminal behavior could become normalized. Therefore, the quantity of information is just as critical as its quality or objectivity.

The Russian proverb "Eat an elephant one bite at a time" perfectly illustrates the Overton Window theory—it introduces marginal ideas in small, digestible pieces until they are fully accepted.

Finally, let's examine a propaganda case that did not follow the Overton model and ended in crisis: in 2022, during a mass power outage in Uzbekistan, candle prices soared. Those profiteering off the crisis were branded traitors. Yet, when companies like Yandex Taxi spike prices during bad weather, the same public does not react as harshly. Why the double standard?

MANTIQIY HATOLIK	
Sham sotuvchi tadbirkorlar	Yandex taxi
	
mahsulot	xizmat
fuqarolar odatdagidan murakkab holga tushdi	fuqarolar odatdagidan murakkab holga tushdi
narx oshirildi	narx oshirildi
vatan xoiniga chiqarildi	normal holdek qabul qilinadi

If they had implemented their price increase policy gradually, like "Yandex Taxi" does, the public might not have even noticed and would have accepted the situation as a normal occurrence, just as they did with "Yandex Taxi".

If you observe closely, you will notice that "Yandex Taxi" has other subtle policies besides just raising prices without alarming the public. For instance, one of the clever tactics they have recently introduced is that if the "Yandex Taxi" you are riding gets stuck in traffic before reaching your destination, the time spent in traffic will be charged additionally to the original fare. What do you think about that? Why is it that people remain silent and unquestioning towards such practices? Believe it or not, there are even individuals who passionately defend these pocket-picking strategies of this brand.

If we pay closer attention, we will find many similar cases in the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres where illogical policies have been successfully normalized into public paradigms. The success of such cases lies in the effective application of the Overton Window theory.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, to prevent our national identity, culture, values, beliefs, firm positions, and worldview from being manipulated by external forces, it is crucial — as active participants in the information space — to critically analyze all information presented to the public, whether popularized or not. This analysis must not only assess the objectivity, quality, prolongation, and quantity of the information but also scrutinize the purposes and methods by which it is presented.

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