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The meaning of the Overton window - Auralcrave

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5-6 minutes



Are we still able to autonomously develop thoughts and behaviors?

Are we owners of our actions?

According to Overton, the answer to these questions is: definitely NO.

We accept what we don't want and we don't even realize it anymore. The problem lies in a window, or rather a social engineering theory known as the Overton Window.

Joseph Overton was an American sociologist. He died young, when he was 43. In 2003 he crashed aboard an ultralight plane that he himself piloted, in circumstances that are not entirely clear.

He had posthumous notoriety for his

social engineering theory, called, precisely, “The Overton Window”. In his studies he tried to explain the mechanisms of persuasion and manipulation of the masses, in particular how an idea can be transformed from completely unacceptable to peacefully accepted and finally legalized.

In orders to do this, we use techniques that advertising and marketing experts know well and apply to guide our way of thinking, our consumption, our beliefs and political inclinations.

Basically it is the typical scheme of dictatorships but also of democracies. One wonders, in fact, often in

retrospect, how entire populations, not only and not always as a result of violent pressures, could at a certain point find themselves thinking all in the same way and passively sharing lifestyles that were not even imaginable before, finding themselves locked in a system that they initially did not want and in a thought that is light years away from their traditional way of being. According to Overton, the manipulation is marked by a precise sequence that can be summarized in the following phases.

The six phases of the Overton window:

1. **Unthinkable**: it is the moment when the “window” is opened. The idea and

related behaviors are unrepresentable, arouse general repulsion, are prohibited. But we start talking about it... and, without anyone realizing it, we talk about it more and more. The rumours has started and the idea is ready for next step.

2. **Prohibition, but with some**

exceptions: at this point the debate starts. The “window” remains confined to the field of unauthorized transgressions.

3. **Acceptable, “I would never do it, but**

why preventing others from doing

it?”: albeit with due distinction, the

“window” enters the sphere of the

socially relevant. Experts take the field

in various capacities in the television salons. Public opinion suspends judgment, moves towards more “soft” positions that appear neutral.

4. **Reasonable**: at this point the idea has already almost completely lost its initial subversive load. “There’s nothing wrong”. It is more than understandable, normal, absolutely normal ... indeed necessary, “we need to create the conditions so that ...”
5. **Widespread**: the “window”, which has risen to a new stage, gathers growing political consensus and at the same time can increase consensus for politics. It now represents a widely shared common feeling, which is

reflected in popular culture

(testimonials, singers, actors, television programs, etc.)

6. **Legal:** the idea is officially incorporated into the state legal system. The goal is achieved.

Cannibalism, why not?

Some time ago, the Russian director Nikita Mihalkov, inspired by the Overton Window, hypothesized the shifts of the “window” on an idea now considered totally extreme (...but not too much): cannibalism. Unacceptable to most, even horrifying. After the second stage, the narrative will imperceptibly change: calling human

flesh eaters “cannibals” is a simplification, it would be better to speak of “men-eaters”. In some cases the phenomenon, widespread since ancient times and rooted in some cultures, is explained by long periods of famine and perhaps also in a genetic predisposition.

If a pressure group or a lobby succeeds in moving the “window” forward, we will have an almost edifying portrait of the previous “cannibals”. In the debates some scholars will begin to call them “anthropophiles”. This eating habit should not be criminalized – it will be said – it is a possible and basically

natural option, without prejudice to hygienic and sanitary precautions, provided that it does not cause permanent damage to third parties and that they are consenting. And so on and on ...

History is full of Overton windows, just think about the totalitarianisms of Nazism and communism, about the “military operations” passed off as “peacekeeping missions”, about wars for energy and resources sold as a fight against terrorism, of the limitations of freedom because of pandemics, etc ...

Maybe it's time to open our eyes and close the window.