

# The Transformation of Moral Norms in The Context of the 'Overton Window' Theory: The Role of Media and Creators

Saydganiyeva Gulbahor

PhD in Philology, Associate Professor at Uzbekistan State University of Journalism and Mass Communications, Uzbekistan

**Received:** 23 April 2025; **Accepted:** 19 May 2025; **Published:** 21 June 2025

**Abstract:** This article analyzes how moral norms in society are changing based on the theory of the "Overton Window." In particular, it compares the shifting process of moral standards as reflected in mass media, cinema, and internet platforms with theoretical approaches. The article explains the expansion or weakening of social values and moral boundaries observed in modern media content through the stages of Overton's theory. These transformations are also examined more deeply using examples from the local media context.

**Keywords:** Overton Window, moral norms, mass media, media, social values, society, norms.

**Introduction:** In contemporary society, social values and moral norms are changing at a rapid pace. These changes are driven by many factors, particularly the influence of mass media and the work of representatives of the arts. In analyzing this process, the theory of the "Overton Window" developed by American political scientist Joseph Overton serves as an important theoretical basis. According to this theory, any idea or social phenomenon passes through several stages, during which concepts previously considered unthinkable or unacceptable can gradually become tolerated, accepted, or even normalized.

This article employs comparative, descriptive, and analytical methods to explore the topic. Opinions and studies of foreign experts are analyzed and compared to support the arguments and draw conclusions.

If we observe the movement of objects in the physical world, we can see how even a seemingly weak or insignificant movement can result in significant changes. For instance, drops of water falling onto a large rock over many years can eventually create cracks and cavities. Similarly, in the human subconscious, such "cracks" or "gaps" can emerge over time. This influence is often referred to as soft power — the ability to affect others through non-coercive means such as culture,

values, and politics. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic force, soft power subtly reshapes social norms and perceptions.

It is natural to question whether the opening of the Overton "crack" has brought only negative consequences to human society. The term "crack" here refers to a narrow passage through which an external environment enters another — a subtle but impactful intrusion. When a previously inconceivable idea is first voiced, society may react with shock, as if chilled by a sudden draft. Initially, there is a desire to "close the crack." However, as the influence gradually spreads — not with sharp force, but gently throughout the body — people may not accept it immediately, but they begin to tolerate it. Over time, acceptance becomes possible. In the last century, Joseph Overton proposed his theory describing how taboo or unacceptable topics may eventually become normalized. He identified the various stages through which these ideas evolve. (Numerous studies have since been published on Overton's theory, many of which are accessible online.)

The Overton Window is a theoretical model that defines the range of ideas and policies considered socially acceptable at a given time within a society. According to the model, any social phenomenon or

idea can progress through the following stages:

1. Absolutely unthinkable (inhumane)
2. Radical
3. Controversial
4. Acceptable
5. Sensible or necessary
6. Norm

Through these stages, topics once viewed as taboo or unacceptable may gradually become normalized — a process that can be significantly accelerated by cultural and media content.

Joseph Overton explored how public perception and consciousness could be reshaped step by step. He analyzed how ideas initially seen as abhorrent or unacceptable could be transformed into normalized societal standards. He also examined how people who are not naturally inclined to accept such changes could nonetheless become indirect agents in the process of implementation.

In contemporary society, we increasingly observe content in films, television series, and social media that openly presents topics which were previously deemed inappropriate or condemned by society. These include depictions of violence, immorality, the erosion of family values, the exposure of private life, and characters that exert negative influence on social behavior — all of which can be interpreted as instances of normalization through the Overton Window.

In collective human consciousness, the opening of such a “window” may have both positive and negative implications. Historically, there have been political taboos — topics deemed completely unacceptable to discuss. Yet, if these relate to human rights and freedom of speech, the opening of the Overton window can serve as a catalyst for democratic development. For example, in the Middle Ages, the idea of women working or even appearing in public was unthinkable. However, by the early 20th century, women’s rights movements gradually led to their active participation in public and professional life. This transition toward equality was shaped by the creative works of reformist intellectuals such as Fitrat, Cho’lpon, and Hamza Hakimzoda, whose poems and plays challenged societal norms and helped transform public perception.

By the mid-20th century, it had become common for women to work in factories and receive higher education. Today, women make up nearly 50% of the workforce across diverse sectors, including governance, business, politics, and industry. What was once considered unthinkable — such as women in leadership roles — has now become a norm.

This raises the critical question: Can the previously impossible now become possible?

There are concerning cases where immoral behaviors alien to human nature — such as those undermining fundamental ethical standards — are subtly infiltrating human consciousness. In the modern world, media, social networks, YouTube content, animated series, advertisements, short video platforms, and online games play a major role in this shift.

For instance, short clips depicting a pregnant female robot, a woman marrying a gorilla or chimpanzee, and celebratory scenes around such events subtly promote ideas of zoophilia, incest, and other unthinkable behaviors. These are increasingly introduced into people’s subconscious minds, particularly through formats such as Shorts and Reels. Though they may appear humorous or fictional, such content contributes to a gradual shift in social boundaries and norms.

In some cases, such influences are not explicitly addressed as central themes, but appear subtly — embedded within unrelated content — as subliminal messages in the form of the so-called 25th frame. Scientifically, the human eye perceives an average of 24 frames per second, while the 25th frame is not consciously registered, but is still processed and stored by the subconscious mind.

A historical example can be found in a 1957 experiment conducted by James Vicary during the screening of the movie *Picnic in New Jersey*. In this experiment, a second projector inserted an additional image every second, resulting in 24 standard frames plus one subliminal frame. The 25th frame contained two messages: “Drink Coca-Cola” and “Eat popcorn.” By the end of the summer, Coca-Cola sales reportedly increased by 17%, and popcorn sales rose by 50%.

This illustrates that messages we fail to consciously notice may still be imprinted onto the subconscious — particularly among children. It becomes essential to critically evaluate what values and psychological messages are embedded in cartoons and online videos children consume through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Are these materials aligned with national and universal moral standards?

Some animated films allegedly contain 25th frames designed to implant irrational or unnatural ideas into children’s minds. For example, certain Walt Disney cartoons — although targeted at young children — depict close relationships between female characters, including suggestive bodily imagery. These representations may inadvertently shape distorted notions of sexual identity from an early age. While viewers focus on the plot, imperceptible subliminal content may still penetrate the subconscious.

A disturbing example is the Skibidi Toilet video series, in which grotesque heads emerge from toilet bowls. Though it may be unsettling for adults, children often consume such content enthusiastically. Certain shows — though marketed as child-friendly — may in fact foster aggression. One real-life example involves a 5–6-year-old boy who, when asked to stop watching his cartoon and engage in other activities, did not throw a tantrum but instead changed his facial expression and declared, “Now I am evil!” In another tragic incident reported last year, a teenager from Chechnya killed a friend after the friend “killed” him in the video game PUBG. If such games are shaping the minds of future generations, the implications are alarming.

To understand the Overton Window more precisely, we can return to a metaphor from nature: over years, water dripping on a stone can carve out a hole. Likewise, repeated exposure to an idea that once seemed unacceptable can gradually normalize it. Even the smallest drop, if tied to spiritual or moral values, may lead to significant consequences.

Indeed, immoral shifts in norms do not begin with overt actions but through subtler changes — such as clothing. For instance, dressing young boys in delicate silk or “atlas” vests is not a cultural expression but a soft shift toward feminization. Today, items like tight-fitting pants, elaborate grooming, facial treatments, and cosmetics — once considered inappropriate for boys — are becoming increasingly normalized.

Such processes are also visible in local media. In some Uzbek TV dramas, behaviors like lying or betrayal — once portrayed as negative — are now presented as tools for enriching character complexity. As a result, viewers may develop sympathy toward such characters and even justify their behavior, thus contributing to a shift in moral norms.

When discussing how immorality penetrates the subconscious, it is impossible to ignore controversial TV series that have sparked public debate. Many Uzbek serials revolve around similar domestic themes, particularly mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dynamics. In one shocking scene, a mother-in-law urges her daughter-in-law to marry her disabled son’s father. Such a grotesque concept is entirely alien to the nation’s culture and history, yet filmmakers depicted it not as a tragedy but as a mundane domestic scenario.

In Uzbek culture, there is a saying: “Slowly killing the skin.” These shallow, repetitive TV dramas are arguably desensitizing viewers to immorality. As the audience becomes accustomed to once-unthinkable content, it may gradually become acceptable. Therefore, we can say without exaggeration that these shows are training society to tolerate the intolerable.

Analyses show that representatives of the media and the arts — particularly television series and cinematic productions — bear a significant responsibility in shaping public discourse. Through their content, they can introduce specific ideas to the masses and influence the process by which these ideas are accepted and internalized by society.

It is also relevant to compare Overton’s theory with other theoretical frameworks that explain moral shifts. For instance, Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony posits that dominant groups shape societal consciousness by establishing their values as the norm. While Gramsci’s approach emphasizes ideological control, the Overton Window provides a more incremental, step-by-step understanding of how a particular idea penetrates and becomes embedded in the public sphere.

Older generations may possess a cognitive immunity — developed through early education and a lack of exposure to such influences during childhood — that shields them from these ideological intrusions. However, children are far more vulnerable. It is a critical mistake for parents to allow children to watch cartoons they themselves have never seen. The overuse of digital gadgets is not only harming children’s physical health but also eroding their moral and psychological integrity. Therefore, it is imperative for parents to watch such content alongside their children and provide appropriate explanations when necessary. Only then can children internalize correct moral messages through their subconscious processing.

We often say, “Children are our future.” But it is we who construct that future. Like a rock that must remain solid, our moral and spiritual foundation must be protected from the continuous “dripping” of harmful influences — those same subtle ideological drops that may eventually erode even the hardest of stones.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Overton Window theory serves as an effective model for analyzing moral transformation within society. Media and cultural products are the primary drivers of this process, playing an active role in the normalization of ideas that were previously considered socially unacceptable. For this reason, content creators — including artists, journalists, and media producers — must be fully aware of the social responsibility attached to their work. When disseminating information, ethical considerations must take precedence over mere economic interests.

Finally, empirical analysis of the impact of local media content will help further reveal the true scope of the Overton Window’s influence and the extent to which it is shaping moral boundaries within society.

**REFERENCES**

Overton, J. (2003). The Overton Window of Political Possibilities.

Postman, N. (1985). Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.

McQuail, D. (2010). Mass Communication Theory.

Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.

Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks.

O'zbek media va serial tahlillari (mahalliy manbalar asosida).