

The Planned Obsolescence of Communication (Ideas From the Book *The Economic Policy of Online Media: Manufacture of Dissent*, Routledge, 2024)

Peter Ayolov

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria

This article examines the emergence of a “planned obsolescence of communication” in the digital age, where information is produced, circulated, and discarded according to the economic logic of digital capitalism rather than the civic needs of democratic societies. The analysis traces how the manufacture of public opinion has shifted from traditional ideological systems—whose narratives once unified large groups through durable mythologies—to a contemporary media environment dominated by junk news, moral anger, and algorithmically curated pseudo-realities. The decline of shared truths, combined with the rise of abstract, entertainment-driven narratives, has weakened the capacity of nation-states to maintain legitimate consensus. Digital oligarchies, motivated by advertising revenue and attention-maximisation, now shape the informational order, creating conditions in which falsehood spreads more efficiently than fact, and dissent becomes a commodity rather than a democratic tool. The article situates this crisis within a broader intellectual tradition, from the MacBride Report to recent whistle-blower testimony and “The Social Dilemma” documentary, to argue that media systems increasingly function through deliberate obsolescence: Information is designed to expire, outrage is engineered for profit, and public discourse is destabilised by incessant novelty. The planned obsolescence of communication thus represents a structural threat to democracy that requires both regulatory reform and a revival of critical media research grounded in public purpose rather than commercial utility.

Keywords: planned obsolescence, communication theory, digital capitalism, disinformation, moral anger, dissent, media criticism, social media algorithms, public opinion, democracy

The consent of the governed is the basic principle of any government. The struggle to form public opinion and manufacture consent are for political power. Each ideology begins with speech, and people live in different narratives. Since the beginning of civilization, homo sapiens have used stories, fairy tales, and mythologies as a means of cooperation. To survive the fight against enemies, building large groups and controlling themselves are necessary. Scientific truth is not a kind of truth suitable for the masses. It is the truth of the ruling elite and the powerful. The only way to control large groups is through mythologies and ideologies. Over time, every belief system loses power, and abstract truths disintegrate. Even then, the inertia of culture keeps them alive. It does not matter if there is real faith in ideological dogmas. They become banal ideologies that work only as a public

Peter Ayolov, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria.

bond. There is no emotional connection and shared faith between people in such communities. Political doctrines are now just banal ideologies in that no one sincerely believes. In this culture of lies, individuals are placed in a situation of everyone against everyone searching for privileges, power, and wealth. Civilization has given up the complex scientific reality of the world and created a false world made up of false news and abstract truths. That is a simpler media image of the world suitable for the human masses. National states are losing their monopoly on the truth because private control over the media means creating realities. New pseudo-ontologies begin to emerge in these times of decline of official truths. False news creates an emotional connection between people, which is the secret of their popularity. At the heart of the abstract truth of media, storytelling is fiction, which brings success to religions and ideologies. Daily use of social media can create new global communities that work almost as new ideological nations. For example, a 2021 study shows that people who use online media have a much stronger suspicion of the benefits of vaccines against COVID-19 than people who use traditional media. In a time of the global pandemic, these results are very worrying. Moral panic about global problems lies in the real winner of these processes, which are digital corporations. The logic of the business of these corporations is to attract the maximum number of audiences, regardless of the content they distribute. They are not interested in the accuracy of the information or the effects on society. The business has extensive experience with the entertainment industry and applies it in journalism and journalism. The so-called serious information simply becomes part of the information sold as a form of entertainment. This new technology to suggest abstract truths and false news also affects developed democracies. The principle of freedom of speech, combined with internet technology and a market economy, gives great freedom to manipulate and disinformation. The problem of abstract truth in the media is a problem with the future of democracy. Can democracy exist in digital capitalism? Change can come only from digital media itself. A new information order is possible only if it serves the administrators of social networks, the digital giants of the Internet. The ruling ideas of the 21st century are the ideas of the ruling class of digital oligarchs. Digital technologies are used for more efficient use of energy. In communication, we face the problem of disinformation and misinformation. Also, there is a problem with many useless and obsolete information, like junk mail. Like many industries in late capitalism, the media as the news manufacturer suffers from "planned obsolescence". We can try to use the term economics for communication. Planned obsolescence of communication is a policy of producing consumer information that rapidly becomes obsolete as junk news. It so requires replacing, achieved by frequent changes in content, difficult access to sources, and the use of alternative facts. In practice, this is something like junk news. The media's message is completely obsolete as information and works as entertainment. Dramatization of the news is more important than the value of information. The ultimate goal of media, like every other manufacturer, is to sell you more items. In mass media's case, conspicuous consumption uses junk news. Manufacture of dissent and moral anger online serves this endless desire for novelty. "Buy angry. Be happy" is the new slogan from the marketing research in 2019. The study, conducted by Alexander DePaoli, associate teaching professor of marketing at Northeastern, and researchers from the University of Miami and Northwestern University, showed that angry shoppers make better decisions. Getting mad makes you're less likely to get distracted. Anger gives you focus on your original desire. "Angry consumers are more goal-oriented", focused, and in control. The conclusion is that anger makes us better customers, but not better citizens. Dissent is important in a democracy as a way to speak to power. Political anger is motivated by a strong belief in the common good. Marketing anger is just a tool manufactured to create better customers. As part of the global business model, digital media manufactures dissent and creates angry people on the Internet. This communication model of planned obsolescence is supranational and post-ideological. It works

so well so far that it is doubtful that it can be changed soon. A change in the paradigm of communication and critical media analysis is needed more than ever. That brings us back to the great tradition of media criticism to which we all own an apology. In 2007 the article “Contrary to Claims, Conventions, and Culture: An Apologia for the Glasgow University Media Group” by Adrian Quinn was published.

Since the appearance of its first book, *Bad News* (1976), the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) has made a sustained contribution to our understanding of media culture and especially to notions of objectivity and impartiality. For the last 30 years, the group has been the object of a diffuse and often gratuitous campaign of ridicule and misrepresentation. The authors of this misrepresentation first caricature the group, labeling it a band of Marxist conspiracy theorists, then blame the group for alienating journalists and retarding the cause of media research. This article argues that the GUMG still offers us useful and relevant ways of approaching media culture that has brought scholars and journalists closer together. (Quinn, 2007, pp. 5-24)

Similar apologia is owed to the many media honest researchers mentioned in the present book. It can be said with certainty that if a media study is sincere and aims towards the common good, its legacy will endure the flak of the Propaganda Model.

Imposing a new world information order is an old idea with no further political supporters. Since the publication of the MacBride Report in 1980, the attitude towards the idea of a fairer and more efficient communication order has not changed much. In 2020 the hope for change comes not from politicians but those responsible for the problem. The creators of social media and digital corporations. Former Facebook employee Francis Haugen is not alone in her desire to change the dangerous business model of the Internet media. In November 2021, she told members of the European Parliament that the EU’s future Digital Services Act (DSA) could set the global standards in transparency, oversight, and enforcement. “The DSA has the potential to be a ‘global gold standard’ and inspire other countries to ‘pursue new rules that would safeguard our democracies’”. The Digital Services Act (DSA) is a legislative proposal by the European Commission to modernize the e-Commerce Directive regarding illegal content, transparent advertising, and disinformation. There is a hope that changing the advertising rules online will reduce the negative effects of the “disinformation for profit” model. The documentary film *The Social Dilemma* from 2020 deals with “the problem over all other problems”—our distorted communication ecosystem. The film features many former employees of digital corporations who openly admit their guilt for the unforeseen effects (latent dysfunctions) of what they have created. They openly call the social media business model a “disinformation for profit” but believe that it can be stopped from within. Only the people who created this machine can bring it back to the service of society. Some of these people are Tristan Harris, former Google Design Ethicist; Tim Kendall, former Facebook executive and former president of Pinterest; Roger McNamee, an early investor at Facebook; Jeff Seibert, a former executive at Twitter; Chamath Palihapitiya, former vice president of growth at Facebook; Shen Parker, former president of Facebook and others. One of the media researchers in the film is Rene Diresta of the Stanford Internet Observatory. She sees the effects of social media as a global attack on democracy. She notes that countries, where democratic elections are held, are often targeted at online conflict propaganda. It shows a weak side of democratic systems in the Internet conditions. “We are immersed in an evolving, ongoing conflict: an ‘Information World War’ in which state actors, terrorists, and ideological extremists leverage the social infrastructure underpinning everyday life to sow discord and erode shared reality”. We all feel that something is wrong on the internet, but the question now is: What to do about it? The film *The Social Dilemma* begins with a quote from Sophocles: “Nothing huge enters the lives of mortals without a curse”. The world is not prepared for the harmful effects of one of the most significant

discoveries in the world of mass communication. It turns out that after all the positive aspects of the Internet, it is time to welcome its dark side. As this book clearly shows, it cannot be said that there are no warnings in the media research about such grim trends. However, most media researchers work in the interests of advertisers and propagandists, not the society they live in. They serve the newly created power of online media and digital corporations. This tendency gradually defined today's post-truth world. The mass communication theory must bear its guilt for lacking a new paradigm to meet the new century's challenges.

Hope for the revival of media research, as a constructive correction of the media, is "The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto". On July 1, 2021. "The International Association for Media and Communication Studies" (IAMCR) has approved the recently launched Manifesto. He called for the protection of public media under attack. The profit-based internet model seriously threatens democracy. The manifesto calls for internet platforms for public services as a non-profit alternative to digital giants. Initiated by members of the IAMCR, the manifesto has been approved by more than a thousand scientists and professionals in communication. Among the first are Noam Chomsky and Jürgen Habermas, whose ideas are the basis of this book. The manifesto envisioned a different media world in 2040. A world in which the ideals of the MacBride Report on information equality, consent, and understanding seem to be reviving:

The Internet and the media landscape are broken. The dominant commercial Internet platforms endanger democracy. They have created a communications landscape dominated by surveillance, advertising, fake news, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and algorithmic politics that tailors and personalizes commercial and political content according to individual tastes and opinions. As currently organized, the Internet separates and divides instead of creating common spaces for negotiating differences and disagreements. Commercial Internet platforms have harmed citizens, users, everyday life, and society. Despite all the great opportunities the Internet has offered to society and individuals, the digital giants led by Apple, Alphabet/Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Alibaba, Facebook, and Tencent have acquired unparalleled economic, political and cultural power. However, public communication is more than business. It is a public purpose. This is why we call for action.

Despite these steps in the right direction, the hope for the end of the manufacturing dissent model is weak. The media research has historically taught us a certain amount of pessimism about the chances of a rapid change in the pattern of mass communication. If we paraphrase the old saying: "Reforming the media is like moving a cemetery; you can't expect help from within". The problem of social networks and the Internet is a problem in human nature that these technologies are increasing. Before solving the issues with machines, people must face the problems of humanism. In the last part of his book, *Civilization, A Personal View*, Kenneth Clark shared his concerns about the change of humanism with materialism. As early as 1969, he warns of the coming "heroic materialism" and its waging chaos. The lack of self-confidence seems to kill civilization, and even the victories of science cannot help it. People can also self-destruct successfully with cynicism and disbelief, as well as bombs. Clark is worried about the lack of alternative to materialism, which is not enough. People have changed very little for the last two thousand years and repeat the same historical mistakes with astonishing persistence. History, that's us, says Kenneth Clark, and access to information about the past is the key to self-knowledge. Human communication aims to create an information order accessible to all. The systematic distortion of communication leads to the apparent dysfunction of all human civilizations. The consequences of the manufacture of dissent on the Internet are still being investigated, but it can indeed be said that they are reversing social progress. For now, hopes for a change in the current global information model are fragile. According to Kenneth Clark, the ideas are in sight, but few people have beliefs, and the center of the new world order is still missing. Clark ends with the fact that we can look to the future before us

with optimism, but not necessarily with joy. He wrote this in 1969. Chaos still pays, Mr. Clark! There's money in ordering disorder. There is no better finale for this book.

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loose upon the world
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.
 The Second Coming
 by William Butler Yeats. (Butler, Allison, & Harrington, 2002)

Conclusion

The planned obsolescence of communication marks a turning point in the history of public discourse. Whereas earlier ideologies relied on durable narratives to bind communities together, today's media systems prioritise novelty, outrage, and rapid turnover of information. In this environment, facts lose value as soon as they appear; truth becomes secondary to visibility; and dissent is manufactured not to challenge power, but to generate clicks. The result is a communication ecosystem in which the emotional volatility of audiences is monetised and civic dialogue collapses under the weight of constant stimulation. Digital platforms—acting as the new ruling class of the informational order—profit from confusion and fragmentation, while democratic institutions struggle to maintain legitimacy in the absence of shared realities. Attempts to reform these systems, from the Digital Services Act to the renewed focus on public-service internet initiatives, represent important steps but remain insufficient without a deeper transformation of the economic logics that govern digital communication. The testimonies of former insiders, as seen in *The Social Dilemma*, illustrate that the dysfunctions of the system are not accidental but structural: Disinformation, polarisation, and moral panic are intrinsic to a business model built on attention extraction. Revisiting the legacy of critical media research—from the Glasgow University Media Group to Habermas's theory of distorted communication—shows that the tools for diagnosing these problems already exist, but their warnings were often marginalised or caricatured. Today, the relevance of their insights is unmistakable. Without a new paradigm capable of confronting the supranational and post-ideological nature of the current media order, democracies risk being governed by informational entropy rather than reasoned consensus. The future of communication will depend on whether societies can re-establish an information order based on transparency, accountability, and shared purpose. Yet, as Kenneth Clark observed, human civilisation repeatedly falters from the same weaknesses: cynicism, apathy, and the search for material advantage. The planned obsolescence of communication intensifies these tendencies, accelerating the fragmentation of the public sphere. Hope remains possible, but, as Clark warned, not necessarily joy. Chaos still pays, and disorder continues to generate profit. In such a world, the centre cannot hold unless a renewed commitment to communicative integrity takes precedence over the economics of dissent.

References

- Ayolov, P. (2023). *The economic policy of online media*. Taylor & Francis.
- Ayolov, P. (2026). *Moral outrage networks, the sociology of digital anger*. Eliva Press.
- Ayolov, P. (2026). *The media scenario: scriptwriting for journalists*. Amazon.com.
- Ayshford, E. (Aug. 1, 2019). Angry consumers are more goal-oriented. *Kellogg Insight*. Retrieved from <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/anger-decision-making> (accessed on 16.12.2020)

- Bracci, A. (August 15, 2019). Buy angry. Be happy. Northwestern University. Retrieved from <https://damore-mckim.northeastern.edu/news/buy-angry-be-happy/> (accessed on 16.06.2020)
- Clark, K. (1969). *Civilization: A personal view*. London: Penguin.
- DiResta, R. (Jun 27, 2019). Media and disinformation: What's at stake for democracy? *YouTube*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FahDJqYCbY> (accessed on 10.10.2021)
- European Parliament. (08-11-2021). Frances Haugen to MEPs: EU digital rules can be a game-changer for the world. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20211107IPR16801/frances-haugen-to-meps-eu-digital-rules-can-be-a-game-changer-for-the-world> (accessed on 10.10.2021)
- IAMCR. (2021). The public service media and public service internet manifesto. Retrieved from <https://iamcr.org/clearinghouse/psmimanifesto> (accessed on 10.10.2021)
- Khan, U., DePaoli, A., & Maimaran, M. (2019). The unique role of anger among negative emotions in goal-directed decision making. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 4(1), 65-76. Retrieved from <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/701028?mobileUi=0&> (accessed on 16.12.2020)
- Piltch-Loeb, R., Savoia, E., Goldberg, B., Hughes, B., Verhey, T., Kayyem, J., ... Testa, M. (May 12, 2021). Examining the effect of information channel on COVID-19 vaccine acceptance. Retrieved from <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0251095> (accessed on 16.06.2020)
- Quinn, A. (2007). Contrary to claims, conventions, and culture: An apologia for the Glasgow University Media Group. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 3(1), 5-24.
- Sotirova, D. (2022). "Framed Events: Media Coverage of the Euro-Atlantic Integration of the Western Balkans (1999-2018)", Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Sofia. ISBN 9789540755434
- Sotirova, D. (2026). THE IDEA OF A UNITED EUROPE AND THE PROSPECT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18760930>
- Sotirova, D. (2023). Foreign Influence over Media in the Western Balkans. In COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA OF THE 21ST CENTURY: EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES. International Scientific Conference of FJMC held on 27-28.10.2022. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18618039>
- Sotirova, D. (2026). "Enemies of the people": Trump's War toward American media. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18444982>
- Sotirova, D. (2026). AI and Deepfake technology in times of crisis of trust in media: Is it really a grave threat to journalism?. *Medialog*, 18, 43-53. <https://doi.org/10.60060/MLg.2025.17.43-53>
- The Social Dilemma. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/the-dilemma/> (accessed on 16.12.2021)