

The Light Bulb Conspiracy

Discussing a film about planned obsolescence

Overview

Participants watch the Arte documentary “The Light Bulb Conspiracy” about planned and intentional obsolescence. They then single out the film’s key messages with the help of guiding questions, and discuss the relationship between planned obsolescence and economic growth.

Instructions

Background




Our economic system relies on constant economic growth. In order for the economy to keep on growing, more and more products and services must be consumed all the time. However, in the wealthy industrialised nations of Western Europe and North America, markets have long been saturated, as virtually everyone now has a fridge, a car, a laptop and a mobile phone... In order for people to carry on consuming and for the economy to continue growing, many products are designed to become obsolescent. Whether light bulbs, computers or mobiles, the idea is to persuade consumers to get rid of a defective product and buy a new one, rather than having the old product repaired. On top of this, advertising constantly tells us that the products we already own are no longer good enough, and that we are always in need of something new.

This intentionally limited lifespan is called “planned obsolescence”.

The term obsolescence (from the Latin *obsolescere*, “to wear out”, “to fall into disuse”) refers to a product being outdated or past its prime. Planned obsolescence describes a form of obsolescence that is artificially induced, i.e. intentional.

Further information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planned_obsolescence,
<http://www.economist.com/node/13354332>

	Unlimited
	90-120 minutes
	Video: “The Light Bulb Conspiracy” (http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/light-bulb-conspiracy/), Laptop (with internet connection if required), projector, paper and pens, camera if used

Execution

1. First, the participants watch the Arte documentary “The Light Bulb Conspiracy”.
2. They then discuss the guiding questions suggested below in order to identify the film’s key messages and lay the foundations for a deeper exploration of specific aspects.
 - › What does obsolescence mean? Why planned obsolescence?
 - › What different kinds of planned obsolescence are mentioned in the film?
 - › Why do companies seek to give their products a particular lifespan? What goals do they pursue with planned obsolescence?
 - › What problems does planned obsolescence entail? What criticism has been voiced against this system?
 - › What is your opinion of planned obsolescence?
 - › What do you think of the statement “An article that refuses to wear out is a tragedy for business”?
 - › What do you think of approaches like “cradle to cradle”? Do you think they are realistic?
 - › In what ways have you experienced planned obsolescence yourself? What products do you know of that break down too quickly, or cannot be repaired?

- > How often do you buy a new mobile/laptop/printer, and why?
- > What steps can be taken against planned obsolescence?
- > What can you do?

3. Taking action

Resistance to planned obsolescence is growing all over the world. In the next step, the participants explore possible courses of action that can be taken against planned obsolescence.

To this end they can, for example, create a short video (or alternatively a sketch) in which they present arguments against planned waste (such as an ad for repairable and sustainable products with an especially long lifespan).

Alternatively, they can conduct internet research to compile instructions on how to repair certain items, or other courses of action.

Variations

The film is quite long. If not much time is available, another option is to show only selected scenes.

Tips for facilitators

Additional information can be found here: <http://spectrum.ieee.org/geek-life/history/the-great-lightbulb-conspiracy>