Foreword

Ch-ch-changes or simply Good Vibrations?

The Summer of Love was the high point of the 1960s. For some.

Not for young Americans called up to fight in Vietnam. Nor for the young and old they would meet in combat. Nor indeed for others, chilled by the Cold War, who felt the weight of Orwell's boot at their throats. But for those who enjoyed greater freedoms, it was a turning point. As that summer in 1967 welcomed the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, so too had colour officially arrived in the monochrome world of the post-war years.

Trying to explain such epiphany to subsequent generations is a thankless task. But rest assured, it redefined what a polished slither of vinyl could bring to a teenager's life. After all, the teenager—a consumer invention of the previous decade—had only just come to terms with the idea that popular music could mean more than to doo-wop or woo the love of the other sex. Now it could embrace political protest too. But *Sgt. Pepper* went way beyond that: it introduced a musical palette, a new colourama, in ways only the bromance of Lennon and McCartney could imagine. The first concept album? Progress?

There's one song on the album, not even its best—only eighty-sixth, in fact, of most plays of the Beatles on Spotify … at *only* sixty million. But it nevertheless captures a tension with its call-and-response that somehow flavours those contradictory times. 'Getting Better' features Paul McCartney singing 'Got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time', to which the harmonic rejoinder reminds us, 'it can't get

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

no worse'. As the story unfolds, the singer darkly confides, 'I used to be cruel to my woman, I beat her and kept her apart from the things that she loved …' But lest we become too concerned, there follows some reassurance: 'Man, I was mean but I'm changing my scene, And I'm doing the best that I can.'[1] A strange confession through today's eyes.

Admittedly, the pull-and-push of the lyrics with a biting beat would soon be overshadowed by the airy 'Here Comes the Sun' from the band's 1969 *Abbey Road* and whose Spotify plays for the song are nearing two billion. Yet the tension of 'Getting Better' recalls strangely the fragile optimism of that short decade, exemplified by the Camelot presidency of John F. Kennedy with its Rostowian development promise. You may recall the five steps of economic take-off from traditional pre-industrial community to the mass consumer society climax. Only to be met with a dampening call-and-response from path dependency theorists who were equally convinced that a society's future path was inevitably hostage to its past. No simple, economic *deus ex machina* for them.

Still, it makes you think. Progress, or the idea of progress, is something we take for granted. It's the mortar in the bricks-and-mortar construction through which we see our lives develop. Indeed the ambition that charts an expected path through the unseeable that leads us to a better life we seek for ourselves and our children. Progress binds market capitalism to liberal democracy, the foundation of the post-war consensus in the West. But lack of progress pulls these uneasy bedfellows apart.[2]

Progress, economic progress, has juddered to a near standstill for this current generation in the early twenty-first century. At least in the West we are told that young people today will be the first generation since 1945 whose standard of living will not be an improvement on what their parents or their parents' parents had come to expect—the ever improving curve of development and progress. Bill Gates once remarked that 'innovation is faster than ever before … yet Americans are more

1 Lyrics ©1967 Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

2 Martin Wolf, *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2024).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

pessimistic about the future'.[3] Sometimes *we have to confess that it's not getting better all the time.*

If progress, technological progress, is to be measured in the popularity of iPhones bought and laid end to end stretching from here to the moon, or by the AI revolution that is already eating itself (such is the speed of change), then there's forward motion. Of a kind. If it's to be measured in 'dual use', that disingenuous exploitation of technologies for consumer and military ends alike, or by the normalisation of political language as it creeps from the extremes of yesterday's margins to today's mainstream, then perhaps we need to rethink what progress means. And how the notion came about.

This is no arcane conversation. Rather it sits at the heart of strategic communications where its sponsors have always, in the field's brief lifetime, sought to achieve change, implying the idea of 'good change' among audiences targeted according to need and vulnerability. That term 'good change' was the answer the development practitioner Robert Chambers offered after much soul-searching when asked to define 'development' following a lifetime's fieldwork for Oxfam.[4] 'Good' had to mean something positive from the perspective of the recipient or target audience, he said, not the donor. Therein lurks a problem. Governments like to talk of a 'theory of change'. For strategic communications the term is a key concept because the field defines itself accordingly, 'to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour' (in NATO civilian thinking), or more broadly 'to understand and shape the information environment' (in NATO military thinking).[5] Jerry Lee Lewis might well have concluded a Whole Lotta Shapin' Goin' On. Subsequently, 'good change' has led governments to embrace psychological methods of behavioural change aimed at affecting what

3 Carl Benedikt Frey, *The Technology Trap* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 10.

4 R. Chambers, 'Editorial: Responsible Well-Being—A Personal Agenda for Development', *World Development* 25, Nº 11 (1997): 1743–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(97)10001-8.

5 Martha Stolze, in Neville Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications,* Terminology Working Group Report No. 3 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023), pp. 9–18.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

the state considers to be bad behaviour while preserving what it regards as implicitly good and under threat, for example, from foreign malign influence. Unmistakably, the actor here is the state as initiator and responder to the object of concern.

So whatever happened to progress? At what point did progress falter … or fail, as an idea? And what do we even mean by it? In short, progress is a broadly accepted idea but one which lacks deep interrogation. Take the modern city, particularly the metropolis. It has that ambiguous association with progress. But reflecting on the city, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith once observed: 'What is the physical face of modern industrial society? […] It is the mirror of social achievement and of misfortune too.' He went on, 'It is not that the city is good, but that the alternatives are always worse.'[6] Is progress to be measured against what no longer is, what went before being almost always thought of as bad, or is it what we should dream it to be, where it is inevitably bound to fall short?

A number of writers are currently engaging with the self-same questions. The geographer Simon Miller McDonald finds a poignant entry into the discussion when he calls progress humanity's worst idea: 'Who defines progress controls the direction of politics, economies and nations. Who controls the parameters of what progress means sets magnetic north for many people's moral, intellectual and political compasses.'[7] That makes it a loaded concept. Miller McDonald's way of seeing the dilemma is intriguing. He unfolds the map of America, reading it from left to right, from Pacific to Atlantic coasts. Then he reverses the reading, moving from right to left. Each offers a different account. Life before European colonisation he describes as one where numerous peoples, ruled over by complex administrative hierarchies, operated in diverse agrarian economic systems with sustainable rather than depletive or parasitic methods that had accompanied the settlers from the east.

6 J.K. Galbraith, *The Age of Uncertainty*, BBC TV, 1977.

7 Simon Miller McDonald, *Progress: A History of Humanity's Worst Idea* (London: William Collins, 2025), p. 30.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

> We see a picture of an agrarian paradise combining great material prosperity with relative ecological stability, achieving an abundance of wealth in which production was mostly innovated, maintained and governed by women. When Europeans arrived, they found societies with elaborate dress and decoration, impressive structures, ample leisure time and entertainment, and complex politics and culture.[8]

Far from Thomas Jefferson's framing of Native Nations as barbaric peoples while he gazed westwards across the unexplored continent, or the philosopher Thomas Hobbes's depiction of the lands they occupied as a brutal state of nature, European progress imported from the Enlightenment east, Miller McDonald argues, was in so many ways inferior to what it now encountered, economically parasitic and pursuing a scorched earth policy. To identify progress, then, should we read his map from left to right rather than the reverse? Whether it was quite so simple, whether pre-Euramerican societies were truly a paradise, is open to question.

The Enlightenment today is considered the beginning of the Age of Reason. In the vein of philosophers like Montesquieu and Kant, the radical Thomas Paine had proposed in 1791 following the French Revolution that 'There is a morning of reason rising upon man on the subject of government, that has not appeared before. As the barbarism of the present old government expires, the moral condition of nations with respect to each other will be changed.'[9] Such noble hopes for humanity would soon be dimmed under the ambitions of the French Jacobins and Napoleon Bonaparte.[10]

8 Ibid., p. 34

9 Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick/New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 30.

10 See Robert Darnton, *The Revolutionary Temper: Paris, 1748–1789* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2024), for the influence of Enlightenment thought on pre-revolutionary discourses.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

Colonisers' human rights abuses over centuries, and their destructive economic policies, have led Miller McDonald to reflect on a nascent United States and compare 'a perfect inversion of genuine progress towards human betterment' with indigenous 'systems that, in general, were better designed to maximise human well-being and nurture the long-term integrity of life than those of the Europeans who arrived later'.[11]

Paradise or no, the Enlightenment had set out to banish superstition, mystery, and blind faith from the human mind. Any distortion in human ambition might be blamed in part on a capitalist system that both grew out of scientific inquiry and technological invention, and accompanied it as it adapted and shaped the marine and territorial littorals into which it spread. If the Enlightenment didn't yet have the answers, regardless, nothing would stand in its relentless path to progress. Science and reasoning would win out. Voltaire and the philosophes in France, Goethe in Germany—at least until the advent of *Sturm und Drang*—and the free-thinking, free-publishing Netherlands, home to Huguenots and other refugees, were the characters in a drama that brought together 'a deliberate undertaking and […] the continuation of a shift in mentality', according to Ritchie Robertson.[12] He highlights the resentment that each successive century has brought to its critique of the Enlightenment:

> It is said to have instilled a narrow, calculating form of rationality that places ends above means in seeking to achieve its purposes, without reference to morality or compassion. This rationality is sometimes also said to commit the opposite error, that of placing means above ends in seeking efficiency at all costs, without examining the purpose which its efficient methods are supposed to serve.[13]

11 Miller McDonald, *Progress*, p. 39.

12 Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: the Pursuit of Happiness, 1680–1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 39.

13 Ibid., p. 769.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

Such sentiments will resonate with today's practitioners charged with demonstrating a 'theory of change' through 'measurements of effect', so often a ritual of self-justifying data capture to meet the demands of bureaucratic oversight.

The problem here is that progress is such a big idea, attenuated in its scope and slippery to the touch. In these tumultuous times we see a leap forward in biomedical research and medical treatment, the historic lifting of billions of people from poverty in the world's two biggest populations, and for most people on the planet the extension of better health and life expectancy. Look the other way, and we see a shortening of life in multiple theatres of war, a new industrial revolution driven by digital technologies producing the same inevitable lines of jobless that had followed each previous break with history. Not forgetting a failure on the part of the cool-headed to mitigate the planet's overheating and economic meltdown through market mania, or to ignore the lessons of the past faced with forewarned but invisible pandemics.

Another problem with progress is that it is tied in so closely to our understanding of liberalism. Which in itself is unclear. When the literary critic Lionel Trilling published *The Liberal Imagination* in 1950, it surprisingly proved a popular success, selling 70,000 copies in hardback, 100,000 in paperback. Liberalism, 'a large tendency rather than a complete body of doctrine', he further described as 'that loose body of middle class opinion that includes such ideas as progress, collectivism, and humanitarianism'. And it is this very looseness that makes it difficult but essential to explore. 'Ideology is not acquired by thought […] but by breathing the haunted air. [It] is a strange submerged life of habit and semi-habit in which to ideas we attach strong passions but no very clear awareness of the concrete reality of their consequences.'[14]

Strategic communications thinking in NATO StratCom doctrine,[15] and concurrently elaborated through its Terminology Working Group,[16]

14 Cited in Louis Menand, *The Free World* (London: 4th Estate, 2021), pp. 168–70).

15 NATO, AJP-10, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Strategic Communications*, 2023.

16 Bolt et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications*.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

roots this emerging field firmly in a responsibility to promote and protect fundamental freedoms of the individual in a liberal democratic offering. Respect for morals and laws, however, is currently taking a back seat to a rejuvenated realism expressed as national interest. The Progress project is seen by many, including some incumbent elites, to be regressive. Significant minorities inside systems of majoritarian rule, but supported by those stuck at the margins of societal exclusion, see a long-overdue transformation in the making. Their 'progressive' measures, counter to policies pursued by the reconstituted Left of politics that would also call itself 'progressive', fix on an ever growing problem—a spectre that haunts the West. Namely, unconstrained bureaucracy.

Perhaps bureaucracies can always appeal to the moral high ground, empowered to deliver the ideals and ambitions of their political masters. An ideology of universal humanitarianism, for example, comprises individual civil rights and global human rights. As it seeks to create what Antonio Gramsci called 'common sense', it enforces rights and conforms adherence to rules and norms in an international order. In the process it naturally spawns ever greater regulation and surveillance in societies by expanding its own remit. Bureaucracies become a self-sustaining, self-interested organism. The *sine qua non* for delivering 'good change', we are led to believe. Hierarchical bureaucracy binds the individual to the state through a variety of command-and-control measures. At the same time, those who would enforce rules, processes, and sanctions against transgression expand in both numbers and authority, thus pressuring society to become increasingly institutionalised in its behaviour.

Hierarchies and networks sit in eternal tension, as symbiotic as conjoined twins. The German sociologist Max Weber talked of 'ideal types' as a heuristic for seeing divergent tendencies. In reality each extreme could contain something of the other, but essentially hierarchies and networks pull against each other. Hence the hierarchical state seeks to enforce conformity to a central will in the face of decentralising dynamics that take a network form. Yet, in reality, organic network diffusion precedes hierarchical organisation. It is the default of nature. Incentives and

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

punishments, however, reinforce the desire to control from the centre. The question, then, becomes whether creativity can emerge from a structure that is conservative and risk-averse by nature yet fuelled by its own moral rectitude. And a further question arises as to what degree creativity and innovation become synonymous with the way we have come to read progress. Thus, how can the new emerge, while somehow protected from the old, cold hand of restrictive intervention?[17]

Scholars from Frey to Fukuyama have followed the path of Weber in trying to answer these questions. China provides the template for the rise and fall of an independent, meritocratic bureaucracy loyal to the emperor, which evolved into a nepotistic and self-serving system more intent on using taxation to stabilise the state while for long periods cutting itself off from foreign trade that would otherwise encourage economic growth. Abandonment of a world-leading position in inventing and developing new technologies from making iron, clocks, paper, gunpowder, to irrigation systems, authors argue, went hand in hand with the failure to adapt its bureaucracy to the idea of progress, being satisfied instead with consolidation or outright regression. This is to oversimplify a rich civilisational history. China's is a complicated story recounted over centuries of territorial expansion and interminable warfare and warlordism,[18] where bureaucratic state administration dates back to the Western Zhou dynasty three thousand years ago. Nevertheless, there are many resonances with the contemporary West, intriguingly in the relationship between technological advances and the nature of state central control.

Europe today faces a similar dilemma. The conversation is current. Financiers and technologists regularly decry the fact that Europe trails China and the US in AI development: 'complexity holds back innovation and optimism alike'.[19] A recent report talked of fixing the

17 Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

18 Carl Benedikt Frey, *How Progress Ends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025); Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (London: Profile Books, 2011); Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

19 *State of European Tech 25* (Atomico, 2025), p. 23.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

friction—making it faster to build across borders at scale, and cement risk culture as foundational infrastructure.[20] Both of these claims jump out of the document. 'The pace of change is slow. The European Commission has promised to create a "28th regime" allowing startups to scale across the continent, but it's not yet confirmed if this will be a Regulation or a Directive.' At the same time, governments are rushing to embrace the new technology for its speed, cost-saving, and web-scraping data capture. And not to be left behind in the race for global dominance between China and the US. Bureaucratic over-regulation and processes nevertheless make this a complicated equation to resolve. The heavy hand of regulation from the centre in Brussels and the national interest and local lawmaking of EU member states make for awkward bedfellows if innovation and creativity require less, not more, control to thrive. The relationship of the individual to the state has become a politically if not ideologically charged debate in liberal democracy today.

Too slow or too fast? Progress or regress? Published at a moment when Nvidia was declared the world's first 5 trillion dollar company in October 2025, its CEO Jensen Huang announced his company's intention to build five new supercomputers for the US government.[21] Meanwhile, shares in Google's parent company Alphabet had doubled in value over seven months to 3.5 trillion dollars, prompting its chief Sundar Pichai to warn against a possible market collapse similar to the dotcom bubble that burst in the late 1990s. 'I think it's both rational and there are moments of irrationality through a moment like this,' he confided.[22] Jamie Dimon, who runs JPMorgan Chase bank, put it another way: 'AI is real. In total AI will pay off. Just like cars in total paid off, and TVs in total paid off, but most people involved in them didn't do well.'[23] That

20 Ibid.

21 Niket Nishant and Rashika Singh, 'Nvidia hits $5 trillion valuation as AI boom powers meteoric rise', *Reuters*, 29 October 2025, www.reuters.com/business/nvidia-poised-record-5-trillion-market-valuation-2025-10-29 [accessed 21 November 2025].

22 Faisal Islam and Rachel Clun, 'Google Boss Says Trillion-Dollar AI Investment Boom Has "Elements of Irrationality"', *BBC News*, 18 November 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy7vrd8k4eo [accessed 21 November 2025].

23 Simon Jack and Michael Sheils McNamee, 'America's Top Banker Sounds Warning on US Stock Market Fall', *BBC News*, 9 October 2025, www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg5ej03p604o [accessed 22 November 2025].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

translates as a lot of people, institutions, and investment funds alike are set to lose a lot of money on the way. And the social effects on the general population are yet to be seen.[24] Predictions of global market collapse abound. The historian Niall Ferguson recalls Charles Kindelberger's five-stage model: (1) *Displacement*—change creates new opportunities for some; (2) *Euphoria or overtrading*—rising expected profits bring rapid growth in share prices; (3) *Mania or bubble*—first-time investors are attracted to easy capital; (4) *Distress*—knowledgeable insiders take profits by selling overpriced shares; (5) *Revulsion or discredit*—outsiders panic and the bubble bursts.[25] Ferguson concludes we're now at stage 3.

Throughout, a charismatic tech entrepreneur Sam Altman has been promising a rosy future. His OpenAI is one of those financial conundrums. In a complex web of circular financing and shareholding that ties the firm into other technology sector leads including Microsoft, Google, Nvidia, Oracle, and CoreWeave, Altman's company has annualised income of 12 billion dollars but is losing money at the rate of 13 billion dollars per quarter. In this world, the Magnificent Seven of Big Tech (Nvidia, Microsoft, Apple, Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, Tesla) account for a third of America's S&P 500. Altman meanwhile promises to raise 10 trillion dollars at today's cost to create new computing capacity by 2033 that would also account for a third of US peak energy use.[26] Inside this vortex of the rational and irrational, Meta's Yann LeCun talks of 'world models' that emulate the way humans think. And some Chinese and Western researchers are now focusing on 'neuro-symbolic AI'. These are unlike large language models (LLMs) that some believe are reaching the limits of their potential. Markets instead might better look to the experience of China's DeepSeek or, as IBM proposes, 'By augmenting and combining the strengths of statistical AI, like machine learning, with the capabilities of humanlike symbolic knowledge and reasoning,

24 See also Erik Brynjolfsson, 'What Workers Really Want from AI', *Standford Report*, https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2025/07/what-workers-really-want-from-ai [accessed 22 November 2025].

25 Niall Ferguson, 'Does the World Really Want What Sam-Al-am Altman Is Selling?', *The Times*, 22 November 2025, pp. 38–39.

26 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

we're aiming to create a revolution in AI, rather than an evolution.'[27] Much of what we have come to consider progress appears rooted in this technology sector and its precarious economics.

America's railways in the nineteenth century generated new fortunes. They drove the quest to reach the Pacific and to unify a burgeoning nation state by connecting east and west coasts. Steel, labour, land, and vast amounts of speculative capital fed the nationalist ambition that moved in step with dreams of wealth. Nothing stood in their way as deserts were traversed, rivers bridged, and mountains skirted or tunnelled. Telegraphic networks and new towns were born. Millions of European immigrants were transported to settle the continent. Crucially, fresh legislation would reverse earlier legislation to the advantage of the political and market project, appealing to what John P. Bowes characterises as 'the language of constitutional authority, civilization versus savagery, property rights, states' rights, tribal sovereignty, and government jurisdiction'.[28] Even treaties and laws that had once granted indigenous peoples their own legally designated lands were reversed in the Pacific Railroads Act of 1862 during President Abraham Lincoln's 37th Congress.[29] Railways were a game changer, synonymous with progress.

Is AI similarly a game changer, disguised as both national interest and self-interest? By early 2024, J.P. Morgan's researchers were identifying which sectors would be in the vanguard of integrating generative AI into their businesses. The bank's investor-clients predicted marketing (28 per cent), legal (21 per cent), media (20 per cent), data analytics (18 per cent), and consumer technology (13 per cent) would be first movers.[30] Today we see marketing and communications agencies that create strategic communications campaigns for governments rapidly embracing new technologies with the full encouragement of their

27 Gillian Tett, 'Behind the AI Bubble, Another Tech Revolution Could Be Brewing', *Financial Times*, 22–23 November 2025, p. 11.

28 John P. Bowes, 'American Indian Removal beyond the Removal Act', *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 1, Nº 1 (Spring 2014), p. 85. https://doi.org/10.5749/natiindistudj.1.1.0065.

29 Michelsen and Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century*, p. 67.

30 'Is Generative AI a Game Changer?', *J.P. Morgan*, 14 February 2024, www.jpmorgan.com/insights/global-research/artificial-intelligence/generative-ai [accessed 22 November 2025].

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

clients, who see greater return on investment or 'value for money' in government bureaucratic language. That's faster turnaround of ideas, shaping of scripts and visuals, and foreshortening of trial and error in an approvals process. And government saves money and gains greater control. Win–win for all parties. Machines use LLMs to plunder the data banks of agencies whose past campaign experiences are now instantly accessible. At the same time, all parties save significant costs, otherwise described as labour or staff. And as in earlier industrial revolutions, machines replace human labour at enormous costs (suffering) but with equally enormous financial gains (rewards).

Progress is a rich idea. Complex and multifaceted. But the notion of 'good change', disingenuous in its simplicity, that sits at the heart of strategic communications, albeit implicit more than explicit, is increasingly being called to account. What change, whose change—in whose interest, and with what legitimacy? The field of strategic communications has yet to penetrate beyond surface-level definitions and 'do the hard yards' of critical interrogation, despite the best efforts of its terminologists. Particularly relevant at this moment is a need to find its position in the family of liberalism and democracy at a time of fracture between libertarians who seek freedom from the central state, liberal democrats with their regulatory and interventionist tastes, and illiberal democrats with more autocratic tendencies. Each seeks to define good change through its own lens. And the early twenty-first century feels like its moment of confrontation in a fight that has been bubbling under for some decades before.

Which brings us back to Lennon and McCartney, and how to change the natural lifespan of a musical chord. The two musicians had developed an enthusiasm for the aleatory, but for many discordant, work of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen. And the composers' influence is noticeable in the radical glissandi of the forty-piece orchestra playing on 'A Day in the Life' that climaxes *Sgt. Pepper.* Following which the piece elides

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

into a final forty-three second E-major piano chord.[31] Combining seven acoustic pianos with subtly different tones, one electric keyboard, and a harmonium, while using their sustain pedals. The conductor Howard Goodall explains how each instrument was separately recorded so that each track subsequently could be separately controlled and staggered to increase its volume.[32] Hence the chord is kept 'alive' for a period any conventional playing would be unable to produce. Normally that chord would be continually decaying. Instead, it appears to resonate forever. It questions the expected: both warm and inviting, but eerily discomforting.

Now that's progress, isn't it? Of a kind. But progress as the attainment of happiness through positive change aligned with the Enlightenment's scientific motion, ever forwards, ever upwards, remains an elusive concept. At best it's an improvement on what came before, which itself may not be so wonderful. *Got to admit it's getting better, a little better all the time … can't get no worse*. Can't it? For strategic communicators, the complex consideration of what progress and change represent beyond a platitudinous aspiration grows ever more urgent as the world around us appears to have moved up a couple of gears.

In this issue of *Defence Strategic Communications* Mitch Ilbury considers the role the Anglo American mining company played in the final years of apartheid South Africa and argues for a more central position for business corporations in how we theorise strategic communications. Shushan Grigoryan interviews teachers in contemporary Armenian schools to evaluate the degree to which the national curriculum, despite a reformist discourse, remains anchored in hierarchical, educational ideals, a legacy of the Soviet system. Milena Iakimova et al. summarise collective discourses of the Human and Social Studies Foundation, Sofia, focusing on the emergence then curious disappearance of a network of 4,000 'mushroom' websites in Bulgaria, all carrying the same propaganda content. Despite the apparent ubiquity of artificial intelligence, Louis Brooke reflects on

31 'BBC Sgt Peppers Musical Revolution with Howard Goodall', *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqzBPsD3u2s [accessed 22 November 2025].

32 Ibid.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.1

why the field of strategic communications has been so slow to adopt the new technology, and how to employ it to shape practice. And how AI is already reshaping the environment in which practice plays out. Chiyuki Aoi, Martin Innes et al. use open-source intelligence to capture malign online discourses aimed at Japan's information space, and offer some surprising concerns. Trish Lavery ventures into the controversial area of geoengineering interventions that include reflecting sunlight to address climate change; she reveals how scientific complexity in this emerging field is opening up a space for disinformation from malign actors. Vera Michlin-Shapir explores the origins of twenty-first-century populism while searching for the relationship between a rise in extremist politicisation among young males and the backdrop of economic downturn and democratic backsliding.

We appreciate the generosity of our authors and peer reviewers, who have given freely of their ideas and time.

Dr Neville Bolt
Editor-in-Chief
Autumn 2025