

# Spiral of Silence

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The spiral of silence is a political science and mass communication theory propounded by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The theory asserts that a person is less likely to voice an opinion on a topic if one feels that one is in the minority for fear of reprisal or isolation from the majority.

### **Basic framework**

The spiral of silence begins with fear of reprisal or isolation, and escalates from there. Individuals use what is described as "an innate ability" or quasi-statistical sense to gauge public opinion. The Mass media play a large part in determining what the dominant opinion is, since our direct observation is limited to a small percentage of the population. The mass media have an enormous impact on how public opinion is portrayed, and can dramatically impact an individual's perception about where public opinion lies, whether or not that portrayal is factual. Noelle-Neumann describes the spiral of silence as a dynamic process, in which predictions about public opinion become fact as mass media's coverage of the majority opinion becomes the status quo, and the minority becomes less likely to speak out. The theory, however, only applies to moral or opinion issues, not issues that can be proven right or wrong using facts (if there, in fact, exists a distinction between fact and value).

### **Crucial points to the theory**

People have a fear of being rejected by those in their social environment, which is called "fear of isolation."

People are constantly observing the behaviors of those around them, and seeing which gain approval and disapproval from society.

People unconsciously issue their own threats of isolation by showing signals of approval or disapproval.

Threats of isolation are avoided by a person's tendency to refrain from making a statement about something they think might attract objections.

People are more willing to publicly state things that they believe will be accepted positively.

The spiral effect begins because when people speak out confidently, the opposition feels a greater sense of fear of isolation and is further convinced to stay silent, since they are in the minority. The feelings continue to grow in either direction exponentially.

A strong moral component is necessary for the issue to activate the spiral.

If there is a social consensus, the spiral will not be activated. There must be two opposing forces.

The mass media has a strong influence on this process.

Fear and threat of isolation are subconscious processes.

The spiral of silence only "holds a sway" over the public for a limited time.

If a topic activates the spiral of silence, this means that the issue is a great threat to social

cohesion.

### **Uses and limitations**

It is as much a measure of protection as it is one of oppression. Since it only applies to moral issues, which tend to evoke passionate responses in even the most reserved individuals, it can be used to contain social unrest over highly controversial topics. Though it can aid in keeping civil order, attempts to employ it knowingly are essentially methods of manipulation and coercion.

### **Overcoming the silence**

The theory explains a vocal minority (the complement of the silent majority) by stating that people who are highly educated, or who have greater affluence, and the few other cavalier individuals who do not fear isolation, are likely to speak out regardless of public opinion. It further states that this minority is a necessary factor of change while the compliant majority is a necessary factor of stability, with both being a product of evolution.

### **Current research**

The spiral of silence tends to be the outcome of something controversial and political in nature. For that reason most current research focuses on hot-button social issues such as smoking, and the aftermath of September 11, 2001. It focuses mainly on current events, and can indicate shifts in societal norms and value structures. The theory seems valid when examining westernized cultures, but studies have failed to take into account cross-cultural differences that may affect one's willingness to speak out. Research has also started looking more into individual differences--that some people more than others are inclined to use cues about the opinion climate when deciding whether to speak out.

### **Cross cultural studies**

There has been little research done to show the impact of cultural variation on an individual's likeliness to speak out in terms of the Spiral of Silence. However, recent improvements in this field have been shown.

### **The United States and Taiwan**

A Cross Cultural Test of the Spiral of Silence by Huiping Huang analyzes the results of a telephone survey done in Taiwan and the United States. The hypotheses tested were the beliefs that the United States is an "individualistic" society, while Taiwan is a "collectivist" society. This suggested that the Spiral of Silence is less likely to be activated in the United States, because individuals are

more likely to put emphasis on their personal goals. They put the "I" identity over the "we" identity, and strive for personal success. Therefore, it was hypothesized that they would be more likely to speak out, regardless of if they are in the minority. On the other hand, it was predicted that individuals in Taiwan put more emphasis on the collective goal, so they would conform to the majority influence in hopes of avoiding tension and conflict. The study also tested the effect of motives, including self-efficacy and self-assurance. Telephone surveys were conducted; the citizens of the United States were questioned in regards to American involvement in Somalia, and the citizens of Taiwan about the possibility of a direct presidential election. Both issues focused on politics and human rights, and were therefore comparable. Respondents were asked to chose "favor," "neutral" or "oppose" in regards to the categories of themselves, family/friends, the media, society, and society in the future about the given issue. Measurements were also taken regarding the individualism/collectivism constructs, and the "motives of not expressing opinion" based on a 1-10 and 1-5 scale respectively, in approval of given statements. Results showed support for the original hypothesis. Overall, Americans were more likely to speak out than Taiwanese. Being incongruous with the majority lessened the motivation of the Taiwanese to speak out (and they had a higher collectivist score), but had little effect on the Americans. In Taiwan, future support and belief of society played a large role in likeliness to voice an opinion, and support that the activation of the Spiral of Silence is in effect. In the United States, it was hypothesized that because they were more individualistic, they would be more likely to speak out if in the minority, or incongruous group. However, this was not true, but Huang suggests that perhaps the issue chosen was not directly prevalent, and therefore, they found it "unnecessary to voice their objections to the majority opinion." Lack of self-efficacy led to lack of speaking out in both countries.

### **Basque nationalism**

Basque Nationalism and the Spiral of Silence is an article by Spencer and Croucher that analyzes the public perception of the ETA in Spain and France. The Basque nation is an "ethno-linguistic minority group" that is not entirely embraced as part of the Spanish nation. The ETA is a group that preaches a violent resistance to everything Spanish, and is greatly known for acts of terrorism. This study was conducted in a similar way as above, with Basque individuals from Spain and France being questioned about their support of the ETA. They were asked questions such as How likely would you be to enter into a conversation with a stranger on a train about the ETA? Taken into consideration were the cultural differences of the two different regions in which the ETA existed. The results supported the theory of the Spiral of Silence. While there was highly unfavorable opinion of the violent group, there was a lack of an outcry to stop it. Individuals claimed that they were more likely to voice their opinions to non-Basques, suggesting that they have a "fear of isolation" in regards to fellow Basques. Furthermore, the Spanish individuals questioned were more likely to be silent because of their greater proximity to the violent acts.

Both studies found some support for the Spiral of Silence, yet both studies had flaws, such as

sample size of convenience and lack of sufficient support. More research needs to be conducted to fully understand how cultural variations affect people's willingness to speak out. Spencer and Croucher suggest long, in-depth interviews with respondents to fully understand their personalities, motives and full opinions about such issues.

## **Spiral of silence on the internet**

### **Isolating the factors that remove isolation**

The concept of isolation has a variety of definitions, dependent upon the circumstances it is investigated in. In one instance the problem of isolation has been defined as "social withdrawal," defined as low relative frequencies of peer interaction. Other researchers have defined isolation as low levels of peer acceptance or high levels of peer rejection. Research that considers isolation with regard to the Internet either focuses on how the Internet makes individuals more isolated from society by cutting off their contact from live human beings or how the Internet decreases social isolation of people by allowing them to expand their social networks and giving them more means to stay in touch with friends and family. Since the development of the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, a wide variety of groups have come into existence, including Web and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), newsgroups, multiuser dimensions (MUDs), and, more recently, commercial virtual communities. The theories and hypotheses about how Internet-based groups impact individuals are numerous and wide-ranging. Some researchers view these fast growing virtual chat cliques, online games, or computer-based marketplaces as a new opportunity, particularly for stigmatized people, to take a more active part in social life.

Traditionally, social isolation has been represented as a one-dimensional construct organized around the notion of a person's position outside the peer group and refers to isolation from the group as a result of being excluded from the group by peers. From children to adults, literature shows that people understand the concept of isolation and fear the repercussions of being isolated from groups of which they are a member. Fearing isolation, people would not feel free to speak up if they feel they hold dissenting views, which means people restrict themselves to having conversation with like-minded individuals, or have no conversation whatsoever. Witschge further explains, Whether it is fear of harming others, or fear to get harmed oneself, there are factors that inhibit people from speaking freely, and which thus results in a non-ideal type of discussion, as it hinders diversity and equality of participants and viewpoints to arise fully".

The medium of the Internet has the power to free people from the fear of social isolation, and in doing so, shuts down the spiral of silence. The Internet allows people to find a place where they can find groups of people with like mindsets and similar points of view. Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson stated that "Internet users can seek out interactions with like-minded individuals who have similar values, and thus become less likely to trust important decisions to people whose

values differ from their own". The features of the Internet could not only bring about more people to deliberate by freeing people of the psychological barriers, but also bring new possibilities in that it "makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation". Unlike traditional media that limit participation, the Internet brings the characteristics of empowerment, enormous scales of available information, specific audiences can be targeted effectively and people can be brought together through the medium.

### **Heterogeneity and anonymity**

The nature of the Internet facilitates not only the participation of more people, but also of a more heterogeneous group of people. Page stated "The onward rush of electronic communications technology will presumably increase the diversity of available ideas and the speed and ease with which they fly about and compete with each other". The reason people engage in deliberations is because of their differences, and the Internet allows differences to be easily found. The Internet seems the perfect place to find different views of a very diverse group of people who are at the same time open to such difference and disagreement needed for deliberation. As stated previously, people avoid deliberation because they fear the consequences. Noelle-Neumann's initial idea of cowering and muted citizens is difficult to reconcile with empirical studies documenting uninhibited discussion in computer-mediated contexts such as chatrooms and newsgroups.

The Internet provides an anonymous setting, and it can be argued that in an anonymous setting, fears of isolation and humiliation would be reduced. Wallace (1999) recognized that when people believe their actions cannot be attributed to them personally, they tend to become less inhibited by social conventions and restraints. This can be very positive, particularly when people are offered the opportunity to discuss difficult personal issues under conditions in which they feel safer.

The groups' ability to taunt an individual is lessened on the Internet, thus reducing the tendency to conform. Wallace goes on to summarize a number of empirical studies that do find that dissenters feel more liberated to express their views online than offline which might result from the fact that the person in the minority would not have to endure taunts or ridicule from people that are making up the majority, or be made to feel uncomfortable for having a different opinion. Stromer-Galley considered that the following characteristics of the online conversation free people from the psychological barriers that keep them from engaging in a face-to-face deliberation; "an absence of non-verbal cues, which leads to a lowered sense of social presence, and a heightened sense of anonymity". Computer-mediated communication decreases social cues, and an absence of non-verbal communication should limit the capacity for ridicule and humiliation when people are physically isolated from each other. In an online discussion group, one possible result is that extreme opinions become muted and thus appear more moderate than they really are. Categorization effects are less likely if other persons are perceived as abstract entities.

The crux of the spiral of silence is that people believe consciously or subconsciously that the expression of unpopular opinions will lead to negative repercussions. These beliefs may not exist on the Internet for several reasons. First, embarrassment and humiliation depends on the physical presence of others. In computer-mediated communication, physical isolation often already exists and poses no further threat. Second, a great deal of normative influence is communicated through nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and gestures, but computer-mediated communication typically precludes many of these cues. Third, Keisler, Siegel, and McQuire observe that nonverbal social context cues convey formality and status inequality in face-to-face communication. When these cues are removed, the importance of social status as source of influence recedes. Group hierarchies that develop in face-to-face interaction emerge less clearly in a mediated environment. The form and consequences of conformity influence should undergo significant changes given the interposition of a medium that reduces the social presence of participants. Social presence is defined as the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction, or the degree to which the medium conveys some of the person's presence.

## **Equality**

An important issue in obtaining heterogeneity in conversation is equal access for all the participants and equal opportunities to influence in the discussion. When people believe they are ignorant about a topic, incapable to participate in a discussion or not equal to their peers, they tend to not even become involved in a deliberation. When people do decide to participate, their participation might be overruled by dominant others, or their contribution might be valued less or more, depending on their status, Dahlberg praises the Internet for its possibility to liberate people from the social hierarchies and power relations that exist offline. "The 'blindness' of cyberspace to bodily identity... people to interact as if they were equals. Arguments are said to be assessed by the value of the claims themselves and not the social position of the poster".

Gastil sees this feature as one of the strongest points of the Internet: "if computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation". Another characteristic that seems to become less important is status. In a discussion forum, your words would carry more weight than your socioeconomic position. While status cues are difficult to detect, perceptions about the status converge, and this lessens stereotyping and prejudice.

It may be that people do feel more equal in online forums than they feel offline. For one thing is certain: racism, ageism, and other kinds of discrimination against out groups "seems to be diminishing because the cues to out-group status are not as obvious". Next to this, the Internet has rapidly and dramatically increased the capacities to develop, share and organize information, realizing more equality of access to information. This might in time lead to more equally informed citizens with more equal capacities to deliberate.

The idea that social isolations cannot exist on the internet must not be confused with the effects that the Internet has on isolating individuals within society. One idea focuses on how the Internet has a positive or negative effect on people's lives through their usage of the Internet. The idea behind this examination was to focus on the interactions that take place on the Internet. Recent literature has brought up the ideas that the Internet reduces social cues, facilitates a lowered sense of social presence and allows users to remain relatively anonymous. All of these ideas lend themselves to a possible hypothesis that they all eliminate the potential for social isolation on the Internet. Further research is needed to test that hypothesis, but if proven, it will show that the spiral of silence cannot exist within the medium of the Internet.

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