Social Media and the Spiral of Silence

Lauren E. Sale

Boston University

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Abstract

This paper explores Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory of the Spiral of Silence and its application to social media. Throughout the paper, modern day examples of social or civic issues linked to the Spiral of Silence theory. Furthermore, the paper looks at analyses of Noelle-Neumann's theory in an attempt to look at the modern day relevance of the theory.

Keywords: Spiral of Silence, Social Media, Ferguson, opinion expression
Most people have seen these scenarios:

1) A friend's Facebook rant about a current news event that gets dozens of likes, comments, or shares.

2) A Twitter discussion with numerous comments bashing the opinion of the original Tweet.

3) Dozens of Facebook friends suddenly sharing the same opinion on some social or political event.

What is the explanation behind these occurrences? In today's hyper-connected world, the expression of opinions is at a high. Social media acts as a strong platform for 'voicing' these opinions. However, it is debatable if social media empowers those with unpopular opinions to share them. In fact, some research indicates that only the dominant opinion can thrive on social media.

**Introduction**

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's iconic book, *The Spiral of Silence*, analyzes how people and the climate shape opinion formation and sharing (1984). Noelle-Neumann forms a unique theory of public opinion and expression. Essentially her Spiral of Silence is the process by which a dominant opinion gains traction because those with opinions perceived as inferior or unpopular do not voice their opinion. Noelle-Neumann's main argument for the lack of opinion expression is a fear of isolation.

Fear of isolation means that people fear being cut off from their social circles. In relevance to opinion expression, this is crucial. Individuals would rather agree with the general opinion expressed in their social network rather than express an opposing idea or opinion. Noelle-Neumann draws on Solomon Asch's conformity experiment to build on
the fear of isolation concept. Asch's studies showed that people were more likely to concur with inaccurate but popular opinions rather than what they knew was the truth (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p.41).

This run away from the fear of isolation is the "spiral" in Noelle-Neumann's theory. The spiral serves as a visual explanation of the theory. The narrowest end part of the spiral represents the small amount of people who refrain from expressing their opinion. These people have an opinion that is far out of the realm of the current public opinion. The individuals with the outlier opinion will not fit into the current opinion climate.


1. Individuals fear social isolation with respect to their private opinions.
2. To avoid isolation, individuals scan their environment to determine which opinions are held by others (gauge opinion climate) and consequently arrive at perceptions of the dominant opinion. This opinion climate measurement is arrived at quasi-statistically, by monitoring the content of mass media and the opinions of others through interpersonal discussion.
3. Individuals not only perceive the dominant opinions but are also able to detect minority opinion ascendancy or the waning of a currently dominant in a dynamic opinion climate.
4. If an individual subscribes to the perceived dominant or ascendant opinion, that individual will not only maintain the opinion but also voice it freely and unreservedly in public discussions. The voicing cues others as to the growing dominance of the opinion, in turn strengthening its perceived status.
5. If an individual subscribes to a perceived minority opinion, that individual, fearing social isolation, will not voice the personal opinion as freely in public. This situation results in an opinion-voicing spiral into silence as minority opinions, being less publicly shared, appear less and less widely held (Lenart, 1994, p.24). The image below depicts the many components involved in the Spiral of Silence.
Noelle-Neumann applied the theory of Spiral of Silence to many historical situations of opinion expression. "What is the relationship between mass psychological explosions and public opinion? To start this investigation, it seems useful to bring to mind the storming of the Bastille..." (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p.109). Noelle-Neumann refers to historian Taine's analysis of the Bastille takeover. From this account, Noelle-Neumann applies her concept how fear of isolation causes the Spiral of Silence. In the storming of the Bastille, the public opinion was so strongly asserted. There was no question as to what the public felt. They wanted to overthrow the French monarchy. The
opposing opinion had no voice in the storming of the Bastille. "So the concrete mass may
serve as an enormously intensified kind of public opinion," (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 112). This heightened public opinion isolates those that do not subscribe to it.

Despite that the storming of the Bastille was over 200 years ago, the Spiral of Silence maintains great relevance in today's society. In a recent study conducted by the Pew Center, researchers analyzed opinion expression and the Spiral of Silence in the contest of Edward Snowden's NSA leaks. Snowden was a contract employee for the National Security Agency who leaked highly classified details and documents of NSA surveillance. One key finding from the study of over 1,000 adults was that a majority were more comfortable sharing their opinions on Snowden's actions if they felt their peers agreed with them. "Those who use Facebook were more willing to share their views if they thought their followers agreed with them. If a person felt that people in their Facebook network agreed with their opinion about the Snowden-NSA issue, they were about twice as likely to join a discussion on Facebook about this issue," (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, and Purcell, 2014).

Many claim that the Internet has provided a voice to those who may not normally get a voice in society. Those with ideas outside of the public opinion have a variety of ways to express them on the Internet. From blogs to Twitter, there is not a shortage of opinion expression platforms. However, is this claim idealist? Is this just a hopeful wish for the Internet? If the idealistic claim of the Internet does hold true, this means the spiral of silence is no longer applicable. Social networks have then defied this influential theory.
Online social networks are a powerful platform for opinion expression. Staying connected to social networks and being able to express one's life or opinion is the primary function of these platforms. However, Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence may apply to the emerging media platform of social networking sites. This presents a problem when it comes to social change, truthful idea expression, and information gathering.

**Literature Review**

Lenart argues throughout his book, *Shaping Political Attitudes* (1994), that mass media effects are just one contributor towards forming public opinions. Lenart theorizes that interpersonal communication plays an important role in shaping public opinion. The book then explores how both mass media and interpersonal communication contribute to political attitudes and opinions. Lenart's text is crucial to the discussion on opinion formation in the social media world because it blends interpersonal and mass communication effects. Social media acts as both interpersonal communication and mass media at the same time and within the same message.

Moy and other researchers studied Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory and how it correlated to the issue of affirmative action in 1998. *The Spiral of Silence and Public Opinion on Affirmative Action* (2001) article concluded that Noelle-Neumann's fear of isolation concept was a valid concern that prevented random individuals from expressing their unpopular views of affirmative action. The researchers found that other important variables were demographics, media use, and perceived importance of the issue at hand. The study combines three important concepts from the Spiral of Silence theory - media use, opinion climate and fear of isolation. A finding from this combination of theories is that mass media plays a key role because individuals are likely to scan their
environment to understand the opinion climate. These findings are relevant because with increasing frequency people are turning to social media sites to gauge the opinion climate on pressing issues. Individuals typically scroll through Twitter to understand what their social networks are saying about hot topics in society such as civil rights. This act of gauging the opinion climate has become a part of everyday life. This dated study set up the framework for future studies to analyze the Spiral of Silence in new media environments (Moy et al., 2001).

Social Capital and the Spiral of Silence by Dalisay, Hmielowski, Kushin, and Yamamoto (2012) explored how characteristics of social capital worked into the Spiral of Silence process. The researchers focused on these indicators of social capital: civic engagement, neighborliness and trust. The context of the study was a proposed United States military expansion on the island of Guam. One key element of this study is its support of Noelle-Neumann's theory that if citizens feel that others support their opinions then they will feel more comfortable expressing their opinion. The research conducted has brought relevance to Noelle-Neumann's theory while expanding upon it with fresh concepts. Furthermore in the explanation of social capital it detailed what could be included that makes the fear of isolation so difficult (Dalisay et al., 2012).

The Spiral of Silence and Fear of Isolation by Neuwirht, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) studies the relationship between fear of isolation and opinion expression concepts. The context in which the study takes place is the 2002 United States Congressional elections and even deeper than that was the possible United States occupation in Iraq. The article roots itself in Noelle-Neumman's primary concept of the Spiral of Silence--fear of isolation. A main finding is that current ideas on opinion expression may actually
be affecting opinion expression. On the whole the research seemed to show that this concept needs restructuring in order to remain relevant in today's world. "At a minimum, the findings suggest that previous research may have greatly underestimated the extent of social conformity processes that are operating for a given issue, as evidenced by the relatively large amounts of unique variance accounted by fear/apprehension variables when predicting avoidance strategies," (Neuwirht et al., 2007, p. 464).

The theory presented in The Spiral of Silence and Fear of Isolation presents a unique stance on the Spiral of Silence theory. Few researchers have evidence to support an update or change to the theory while still building on Noelle-Neumann's. This theory is not a proper support or opponent; instead it advocates for a hybrid theory that is relevant for today's society. Several other researchers have constructed theories that blend Noelle-Neumann's with their own findings. Furthermore, the Spiral of Silence gains increasing relevance with the emergence of new social or civic issues.

In Social Media and the "Spiral of Silence," Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, and Purcell (2014) analyze how Noelle-Neumann's theory applies to social media. The Pew-Research Center conducted a large-scale study of individuals' opinions and Edward Snowden's whistle-blowing actions in 2013. Ultimately, the Pew Center found that social media did not act as an alternative opinion expression platform. The Center found that individuals shared their opinions if they perceived they were in accordance with how the general public of their social networks felt (Hampton et al., 2014).

The Center's findings are important to the current discussion on Spiral of Silence and social media because they correlated it to a major event in United States history. The situation they selected was one where a great deal of opinion expression and debate was
occurring. The findings maintain that many of Noelle-Neumann's points are still relevant on social media.

*Social Media in the Arab Spring: Hope and the Spiral of Voice* by Hochheimer and Al-Emad (2013) provides an opposing view of Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence. The researchers argue that social media has allowed for a spiral of voice meaning that the more people shared on social media during a time of desperation, the more others felt empowered to share their opinion. This relates to the aforementioned idealistic view of the Internet. The researchers apply the theory of a spiral of voice to the Arab Spring of 2011 and how the related expression of opinion played out on social media.

"Yet, with the proliferation of newly emerging polylogic social media, the experiences of both Tunisia and Egypt, Spiral of Voice theory suggests that people may become more willing to engage one another as they perceive their commonality and solidarity with others far removed. . . The lateral spread of sounds and pictures, unencumbered by authoritarian systems and peoples’ fear of them, become the means through which people begin to feel their own power, by themselves, and as connected with each other," (Hochheimer and Al-Emad, 2013, p.12).

A lofty yet though provoking concept, Hochheimer and Al-Emad present a valid point of view to the discussion of Spiral of Silence. However, the research comes off as biased and understudied. The opinion provides a good counterargument to the current situation of Spiral of Silence. Furthermore, it provokes the emergence of expansion on Noelle-Neumann's classic theory.

The major works of literature in the modern day discussion on the Spiral of Silence theory provide a crucial backdrop to the future discussion on the theory. The applicability of the theory is going through major changes in the world of social media networks.
Analysis

Expression of opinion is a crucial part of societal progression. Opinion expression is the foundation of a democracy. The Human Rights Education Association has emphasized the importance of this task, "Freedom of expression is essential in enabling democracy to work and public participation in decision-making. . . Freedom of expression is thus not only important for individual dignity but also to participation, accountability and democracy," (Human Rights Education Association, 2014). In today's world, opinion expression typically occurs on social media platforms. Users can post their latest rant about the Affordable Health Care Act on Facebook or Tweet their rage at the NYPD for killing Eric Garner. However, the question of whether the Internet, and more specifically social media, truly acts as a platform for free-flowing opinion expression is debatable. By looking at current, socio-political events, we can begin to see how social media acts as an opinion expression platform and where it can to improve to allow for more expression.

In Ferguson, Missouri, there has been major civil unrest after a grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson, a police officer involved in the killing of an unarmed young African-American male. The young man, Michael Brown, was shot 12 times on a summer evening in 2014 (CNN, Clarke and Castillo, 2014). Since the death of Brown, many have expressed concern that this was an unjustified killing and that police may use brute force that exceeds the necessary amount. Due to questionable nature of the murder, there has been a great deal of expression against Wilson and police officers in general. Twitter in particular has been a platform for the expression of ideas against Wilson, police brutality, questionable use of deadly force, and racial inequality.
The Tweets below show just one user's (@slb79) expression of opinion immediately after the murder of Brown.

(Brown, 2014).
Slb79's, or Stacia L. Brown, Tweets reflect the popular opinion of the Mike Brown shooting. Popular hash tags for the incident are #Ferguson, #FergusonShooting, #MikeBrown, and #MikeBrownShooting. In a qualitative search conducted on these hash tags, a majority of them share the sentiment of Slb79. These are Twitter users who do not agree with the police action taken during and after the shooting. In a recently conducted qualitative search of #FergusonShooting on Twitter, a majority of the Tweets are in support of Mike Brown and express anger about his death. There are few that express the conflicting opinion. One example of such is displayed below.

(Jacobsen, 2014).

This lack of contrary opinion illustrates how the dominant opinion can take over Twitter. This could show a spiral of silence in which the prevailing opinion gains more traction because people are reserved about expressing their opposing views. In the Pew Center's *Social Media and the 'Spiral of Silence'* report (2014), the researchers provide one explanation for this. "Thus, it might be the case that people do not want to disclose
their minority views for fear of disappointing their friends, getting into fruitless arguments, or losing them entirely," (Hampton et al., 2014, p.8). This fear of expression reinforces Noelle-Neumann's theory of the Spiral.

This Spiral of Silence becomes problematic when social change is the goal. The civil unrest surrounding Mike Brown's death is not just about his death. The unrest is reflective of larger societal issues such as racism. When protestor's are out in the streets of Ferguson, it is to incite some social change and begin to fix the problem of racism in America. It can be argued that opinion expression on Twitter has the same purpose-awareness and social change. However, what happens when it is only the dominant opinion being expressed due to the Spiral of Silence? This outcome can hinder social change. According to Noelle-Neumann's steps of the Spiral, the 4th stage will have people attach to the dominant idea and be more willing to openly express it (Lenart, 1994, p.24).

Claire Cain Miller of The New York Times suggests, "the Internet, it seems, is contributing to the polarization of America, as people surround themselves with people who think like them and hesitate to say anything different. Internet companies magnify the effect, by tweaking their algorithms to show us more content from people who are similar to us," (The New York Times, 2014). Miller highlights another issue within this problem-- technology isn't always promoting the expression of dissenting opinions. With complex algorithms and codes designed to show users the most appealing content, social media platforms are not usually showing opinions outside of the user's comfort zone. This is an issue when social change is the goal. In the world of perpetually evolving social media, it is as if the algorithms are a catalyst for the Spiral of Silence.
Social media is not just about the expression of ideas but also the reception of and interaction with those opinions. Twitter has a "Retweet" and favorite option. Facebook has a "Like" button. Instagram has a "heart" that shows users like a photograph. With this feedback, users can measure the approval of their post. The more likes someone gets on a status update, the more reinforced they may feel in their opinion. This feature is a crucial part of the social media experience.

"Humans are acutely attuned to the approval of others, constantly reading cues to judge whether people agree with them, the researchers said. Active social media users get many more of these cues — like status updates, news stories people choose to share and photos of how they spend their days — and so they become less likely to speak up," (Cain-Miller, 2014). Social media can act as an attention or approval-seeking platform. This desire for approval of a user's social media activity leads to hiding ideas that may not get approval. In the case of Ferguson and the Mike Brown killing, social media users may have refrained from posting content in support of Wilson or the police department because it was outside of the dominant opinion scope. A user may fear being harassed, bothered or otherwise negatively impacted by sharing their minority opinion. This fear ultimately hinders the idealistic proposed result of the Internet— a free flow of ideas. Research has proven that social media has yet to escape Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence. Another issue behind the Spiral of Silence is the lack of the full truth for information gathering. The Spiral of Silence ultimately represents just one side of an event, situation, or dilemma. With the growth of the dominant opinion, the minority idea fades away and people are only left with the one-sided story of the dominant opinion.

This problem is escalated when people gather their information predominantly
from social media platforms. It is not uncommon for individuals to rely on Twitter and Facebook for news that they once would get from a traditional news source such as television or newspapers. This misrepresentation of information can potentially further the Spiral of Silence. On a grander scale, this could impact the general opinion of the public on historic events.

In 2013, the Library of Congress began archiving Tweets. If people 30 years from now look at Tweets under #Ferguson, they will mainly see the outrage and anger expressed at police and a society stuck in inequality. Due to the power of the dominant opinion, they may miss the minority opinion expression because it makes up such a small percentage of discussion on Twitter. The impact this could have on the depiction or perception of historical events is tremendous.

**Conclusion**

As previously mentioned, the phenomena of the Spiral of Silence on social media presents a problem when it comes to social change, truthful idea expression, and information gathering. This analysis of social media, current issues, and the Spiral of Silence can potentially trigger change on numerous levels.

The first major step would be more conclusive research on modern day events that trigger the Spiral of Silence. The Pew Center has broke ground and begun to pave the way for other studies to follow. The psychology behind the Spiral of Silence needs a more in-depth analysis in order to begin to understand why individuals fall into it. From there academics can further analyze the psychology of social media and opinion sharing on social networking platforms. This scholarly research may answer some questions
regarding opinion expression on social media. Furthermore, it can begin to address some of the issues raised in the introduction.

American film director David Lynch said, "everyone is on the Internet but they're not all talking with each other. There are groups upon groups out there, but they don't talk to one another. So while the Internet brings everyone into a shared space, it does not necessarily bring them together" (2014). The Spiral of Silence on social media is not bringing people together across groups and ideologies. Through scholarly research, a solution to bring individuals together regardless of the opinion climate may be discovered. This matters because this will bring the world closer to the idealistic characterization of the Internet-- a place for the free and unrestrained spread of knowledge and opinions.
References


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