

Spiral of Silence

Originally proposed by German political scientist [Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann](#) in 1974, Spiral of silence is the term meant to refer to the tendency of people to remain silent when they feel that their views are in opposition to the majority view on a subject. The theory posits that they remain silent for a few reasons:

1. Fear of isolation when the group or public realizes that the individual has a divergent opinion from the status quo.
2. Fear of reprisal or more extreme isolation, in the sense that voicing said opinion might lead to a negative consequence beyond that of mere isolation (loss of a job, status, etc.)

For this theory to be plausible it relies on the idea that in a given situation we all possess a sort of intuitive way of knowing what the prevailing opinion happens to be. The spiral is created or reinforced when someone in the perceived opinion majority speaks out confidently in support of the majority opinion, hence the minority begins to be more and more distanced from a place where they are comfortable to voice their opinion and begin to experience the aforementioned fears.

The spiral effect is experienced inasmuch as this activates a downward spiral where fears continually build within the minority opinion holder, hence the minority opinion is never voiced. Since it's appearing on this blog you could assume that the theory posits that the mass media has an effect on this process, if you're assuming that... you're right on. The media plays an important role in this process, especially in dictating or perceptually dictating the majority opinion.

The closer an individual feels their opinion resides to the held majority opinion the more likely they are to be willing to voice it in public discourse. A few other important tenets to mention: this theory relies heavily on the idea that the opinion must have a distinct moral component (i.e. abortion, legalization of _____), no one will experience the spiral of silence trying to talk out what toppings to get on their pizza with roommates.

The theory has some weaknesses or at least points of contention, two of the most notable are those of the vocal minority and the internet. The internet (a.k.a. interwebs, series of tubes – thanks, AI) seemingly levels the playing field, where a minority opinion won't be felt by the individual as a minority opinion and might be voiced in that arena whereas the individual would have not been so vocal in another place of public discourse. Second, the vocal minority – you know these people, they may be the only one who thinks that cats need to right to vote, but they won't shut up about it and are seemingly outside of the effects of the Spiral of Silence.

There you have it... Spiral of Silence. Don't spend it all in one place.

Resources:

[University of Twente](#) lists some major pubs regarding the theory. So does Wikipedia, but no one cares. Here are Twente's:

1. Glynn, J.C., Hayes, F.A. & Shanahan, J. (1997). "Perceived support for ones opinions sand willingness to speak out: A meta-analysis of survey studies on the 'spiral of silence'" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (3):452-463.
2. Glynn, J.C. & McLeod, J. (1984). "Public opinion du jour: An examination of the spiral of silence," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48 (4):731-740.
3. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion — Our social skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
4. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1991). *The theory of public opinion: The concept of the Spiral of Silence* In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook* 14, 256-287. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
5. Simpson, C. (1996). "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' and the historical context of communication theory." *Journal of Communication* 46 (3):149-173.
6. Taylor, D.G. (1982). "Pluralistic ignorance and the spiral of silence: A formal analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 46(3):311-335.
7. See also: Kennamer, J.D. (1990). "Self-serving biases in perceiving the opinions of others: Implications for the spiral of silence," *Communication Research* 17 (3):393-404; Yassin Ahmed Lashin (1984). *Testing the spiral of silence hypothesis: Toward an integrated theory of public opinion*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.