

Spiral of Silence

of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

The 1980 presidential election seemed too close to call. Polls reported that President Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan were in a virtual dead heat over the last two months of the campaign. But according to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, professor emeritus of communications research at the Institut für Publizistik in Germany, most pollsters asked the wrong question. Instead of asking, “Who do you plan to vote for?” they should have asked, “Who do you think will win the election?”

They would have discovered that even while voter preference was holding equal, the expectation that Reagan would win was growing from week to week. Noelle-Neumann claims that people’s assessment of the political climate, and especially their forecast of future trends, are early, reliable indicators of what will happen in an election. In Carter’s case they were. The night before the vote, Democratic pollster Pat Caddell came to the president and sadly announced that the contest was over. Millions of voters were taking part in a last-minute swing for Reagan. The actual vote the next day buried Carter in a Republican landslide.

Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence is a theory that explains the growth and spread of public opinion. As founder and director of the Allensbach Institute (the German counterpart to America’s Gallup poll organization), she has come to recognize the power of public opinion. Like seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, she regards public opinion as a *tangible force* that keeps people in line. Locke outlined three forms of law—divine, civil, and opinion. He claimed that the law of opinion is the only law by which people really abide.¹ Whether in politics, ethics, or matters of fashion, Noelle-Neumann defines public opinion as “opinions on controversial issues that one *can* express in public without isolating oneself.”²

The term *spiral of silence* refers to the increasing pressure people feel to conceal their views when they think they are in the minority. Noelle-Neumann believes that television accelerates the spiral, but to grasp the role of the mass media in the process we first must understand people’s extraordinary sensitivity to the ever-changing standard of what society will tolerate.

AN UNCANNY GIFT: PERCEIVING THE CLIMATE OF OPINION

Noelle-Neumann is constantly amazed at the human ability to discern the climate of public opinion accurately. Science has fixed on five bodily receptors through which people sense their environment: eye (sight), ear (sound), tongue (taste), nose (smell), skin (touch). Only half facetiously, the veteran pollster postulates a “quasi-statistical organ”—a sixth sense that provides trustworthy information about what society in general is thinking and feeling. It’s as if people come equipped with antennae that quiver to every shift in the social breeze. How else, she says, can we account for the fact that “when a swing in the climate occurs for or against a party, a person, or a particular idea, it seems to be sensed everywhere at almost exactly the same time, by [everybody].”³ Without benefit of random samples, interview schedules, or frequency distributions, average people can tell which way the wind is blowing before the scientific polls sample the climate of public opinion.

Noelle-Neumann recommends two questions to sample the barometric readings inside people’s heads:

1. “Regardless of your personal opinion, do you think most people. . . ?” [present climate]
2. “Will more or less people think this way a year from now?” [future forecast]

People rarely respond, “How should I know?” or “I’m no prophet.” She believes that assessing the public mood, present or future, is the most natural thing in the world for people to do. Thirty years of survey experience has convinced her that people usually get it right. Even when they misread the present, they invariably can spot future trends. For example, near the end of every year her Allensbach Institute asks a representative sample of German men and women, “Do you look forward to the coming year with hopes or with fears?” The level of optimism expressed shows no relationship to economic growth in the year the question is asked, but it gives an uncanny forecast of the actual rise or fall in the growth rate of the nation’s GNP for *the following year*.

The human ability to spot momentum in public tastes and opinions is not used frivolously. Noelle-Neumann says it requires an unbelievable expenditure of energy to figure out which ideas are on the increase and which are on the decline. The tremendous concentration required to monitor social trends makes sense only when compared with a greater strain—the danger of isolating oneself with an opinion that has gone out of style. “The effort spent in observing the environment is apparently a smaller price to pay than the risk of losing the goodwill of one’s fellow human beings—of becoming rejected, despised, alone.”⁴

THE FEAR OF ISOLATION

According to Noelle-Neumann, the fear of isolation is the centrifugal force that accelerates the spiral of silence. She draws heavily on the famous conformity research of Swarthmore psychologist Solomon Asch to support her claim. Asch demonstrated that people will ignore the plain evidence of their senses and yield to perceived group pressure.⁵

A _____
 B _____
 C _____
 X _____

Look at the lines above. Which line—A, B, or C—is the same length as line X? The answer seems obvious, and left on his or her own, everyone picks line A. But put an individual in a group of experimental confederates who unanimously state that line B is the right answer, and the unsuspecting subject will feel great anxiety. Thoughts of isolation are very real to the person who considers standing firm: “Will these folks frown, argue, or curse my stubbornness? Worse yet, will they snicker or laugh at me? If I say what I really think, will they turn away in contempt or kick me out of the group?” Asch found that most people placed in this stressful situation would conform at least some, if not all, of the time.

Is fear of isolation a trait peculiar to Americans? Noelle-Neumann rejects that possibility on the basis of Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram’s follow-up study conducted in Europe. Milgram selected France and Norway as nations with strikingly diverse cultures—the first one highly individualistic, the other with a strong sense of cohesiveness. As he anticipated, Norwegians conformed more than the French. But like their American counterparts, the majority of people in both groups were unable to stand firm in the face of group pressure.

Noelle-Neumann also considers the possibility that people conform more out of a desire to identify with a winner than to avoid isolation. For example, after an important election is over, a greater percentage of people report voting for the victor than the ballot totals would indicate. But she doesn’t consider false reports as attempts to belatedly climb on the bandwagon and bask in reflected glory. Rather, she interprets the petty lies as a defensive strategy to avoid the social stigma that comes from being a deviant on value-laden issues. Even though a go-along-to-get-along approach might brand a person as a conformist or a hanger-on, Allensbach respondents indicate that rejection is even worse.

Banishment from the group, long-term solitary confinement, and sanctioned public ridicule are regarded as cruel punishments in most parts of the world. Noelle-Neumann says that only the criminal or moral hero doesn’t care what society thinks. The rest of us want the peace and contentment that comes from belonging. Nobel Prize-winner Mother Teresa affirms Noelle-Neumann’s analysis: “The worst sickness is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but the feeling of being respected by no one, of being unloved, deserted by everyone.”⁶

The book contains a cartoon at this location. Permission has been granted only for use in the original print version of the book.

A TIME TO SPEAK AND A TIME TO KEEP SILENT

Since people can tell when they are out of sync with public opinion and they fear being isolated for holding views that aren't in favor, we could expect those who see themselves in the minority to keep silent. This is precisely what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann predicts:

Individuals who . . . notice that their own personal opinion is spreading and is taken over by others, will voice this opinion self-confidently in public. On the other hand, individuals who notice that their own opinions are losing ground, will be inclined to adopt a more reserved attitude.⁷

She is not suggesting that the latter group will easily abandon an unpopular conviction and change their minds. People aren't weather vanes. But men and women who realize they are fighting a headwind may duck their heads and keep their own counsel. Their silence will probably pass unnoticed or be taken as tacit agreement, so they won't be hassled. Once Operation Desert Storm was launched against the forces of Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein, citizens of the United States who spoke out against the military action had to be either very brave or very foolish. The situation was different when President Clinton sent

American troops into Bosnia. Sensing that public opinion was not in favor of intervention and that the media would play up the dangers of the mission, people felt free to voice their dissent.

In the first 1988 presidential debate, George Bush invoked the “L word.” He called Michael Dukakis a liberal—“a card-carrying member of the ACLU,” an organization that defends atheists, criminals, and child pornographers. Millions of liberals around the country winced at this verbal body blow to their position. Conservatism had been on the rise for over a decade; liberalism had been in retreat. Liberals could have protested that the American Civil Liberties Union also defended patriot Ollie North, or that Bush’s positions on social security, Medicare, and relations with China were originally advocated by liberals. But consistent with Noelle-Neumann’s prediction, they found it safer to suffer in silence.

The Allensbach Institute has discovered an effective way to find out whether people are willing to speak out in favor of their viewpoint. Suppose, for example, that the topic is abortion. They would ask:

Assume that you have five hours of train or plane travel ahead of you, and somebody [next to you] begins to talk about abortion. Would you like to talk with this person or would you rather not talk?⁸

The train/plane test reveals a series of factors which determine the likelihood that people will voice their opinions. The first factor is by far the most important.

1. Those who favor the majority position are more willing to express their views than those who belong to the minority faction. “Feeling in harmony with the spirit of the age loosens the tongue.”
2. If perception of the present opinion climate doesn’t match a person’s forecast for the future, willingness to speak out depends more on the future trend.
3. People are more willing to speak to those who share their thoughts than to those who disagree. When you fear isolation, friends are safer than foes.
4. Low self-esteem will cause a person to remain mute. The Allensbach team identifies these individuals by their agreement with a survey statement about relationships: “I know very few people.”
5. Males, young adults, and people of the middle and upper classes find it easier to speak out.
6. Existing law encourages people to express their opinion when they feel outnumbered. The Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision emboldened “closet pro-choice” women who had been fearing public reprisal.
7. Various camps differ in their readiness to stand up for their convictions. Vice President Spiro Agnew’s label of “silent majority” touched a responsive chord in the early 1970s among conservatives who were prone to silence.

THE ACCELERATING SPIRAL OF SILENCE

You now have the building blocks that Noelle-Neumann uses to construct her model of public opinion:

Human ability to gauge trends of public sentiment.

Individuals' justifiable fear of isolation.

People's hesitancy to express minority views.

She integrates these factors in the following description of the plight of those who sense minority status. Her summary of the theory reveals that they are indeed caught in a spiral of silence.

People . . . live in perpetual fear of isolating themselves and carefully observe their environment to see which opinions increase and which ones decrease. If they find that their views predominate or increase, then they express themselves freely in public; if they find that their views are losing supporters, then they become fearful, conceal their convictions in public and fall silent. Because the one group express themselves with self-confidence whereas the others remain silent, the former appear to be strong in public, the latter weaker than their numbers suggest. This encourages others to express themselves or to fall silent, and a spiral process comes into play.⁹

Figure 30.1 pictures the journey of minority factions down the spiral of silence. The ball represents people who sense a slight discrepancy between their position and the prevailing public opinion, much like President Jimmy Carter's supporters in the early fall of 1980. Up to this point they felt comfortable expressing their views in public, perhaps even displaying campaign buttons or bumper stickers. But then the nagging fear of isolation—insistent as the pull of gravity—convinces them to be more circumspect in what they say. Bumper stickers disappear, and they avoid arguments with Reaganites. Carter hasn't lost any voting strength; only the outward fervor has tapered off. However, the Republican clamor for Reagan is undiminished, so Carter backers get the impression of a dip in support for their man.

Carter's people have now come full circle. Their political antennae register a relative shift in public sentiment even before it shows up in the polls. Reagan's apparent strength becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because it causes Democrats to see a widening gap between themselves and the majority opinion. To an even greater degree, they draw back from public scrutiny, and thus begin another circuit on the accelerating downward spiral toward silence. The greater the perceived discrepancy between the prevailing public opinion and their own viewpoint, the more they feel the force of society's demand that they give in. Finally, the pressure to conform becomes so great that some who are most fearful of isolation switch sides. The result is a surprising (but predictable) landslide for Ronald Reagan.

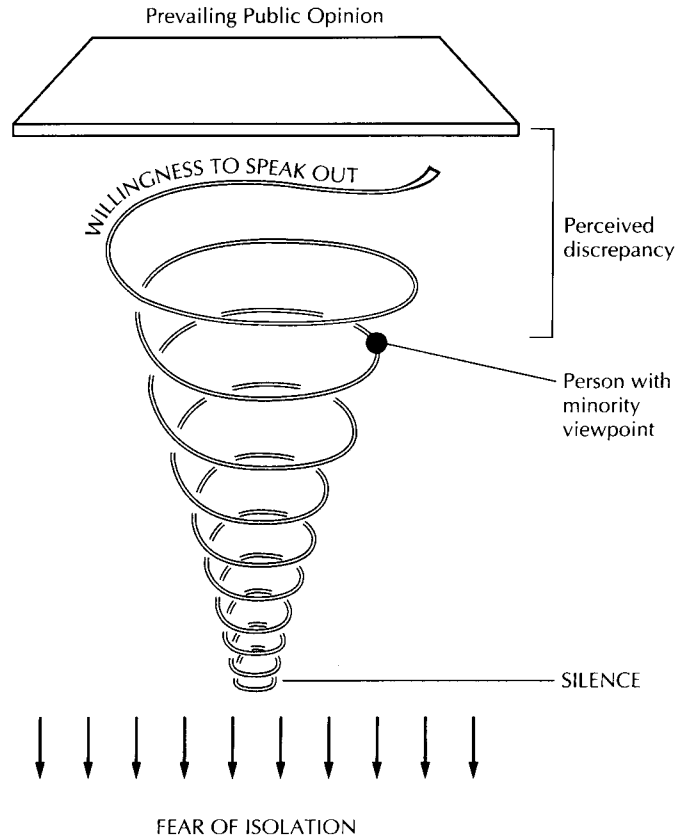


FIGURE 30.1
The Downward Spiral Toward Silence

THE POWERFUL ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

Noelle-Neumann believes that the media accelerate the muting of the minority in the spiral of silence. Although every human being comes equipped with a quasi-statistical organ with which to analyze the climate of public opinion, that early warning system requires data to process. Direct observation gives us only a small proportion of the information we use; the print and electronic media provide most of our knowledge about the world around us. Marshall McLuhan said that individual media are extensions of specific physical senses. Noelle-Neumann regards *all* media forms as agents of that hypothetical sixth sense, but she isn't convinced that they always serve well.

For decades after the 1940 Erie County voter study, American media sociologists insisted that selective exposure on the part of the reader or viewer neutralized any persuasive effect that the print and broadcast media might have.

Like other European scholars, Noelle-Neumann rejects the view that the media only reinforce preexisting beliefs. She admits that the written word's power to change attitudes may be limited by selective exposure. Given the existing variety of newspapers, magazines, and current events literature, it's quite possible for a reader to avoid contrary opinions. But she thinks television is a different matter: "The effects of mass media increase in proportion to the degree in which selective perception is made difficult."¹⁰ A fictional account of a crooked poker game in a small rural town illustrates her claim.

A farm worker regularly received his wages at the end of the day on Friday. Each week he then walked to the local tavern and lost all his money gambling in a back-room poker game of five-card draw. After a few months a friend took him aside and advised, "Don't play with those guys any more—they're cheating you blind." "Oh I know the game is rigged," the farmhand replied, "but it's the only game in town."

Television is often the only game in town, yet Noelle-Neumann says that media researchers usually fail to recognize that fact. They try to test for media effects in the laboratory, but they can't re-create the "ubiquity, consonance, and cumulation" that give TV its power. She is referring to television's all-surrounding presence, its single point of view, and the constant repetition of its message. These factors override selective exposure and bias a whole nation's judgment of the prevailing opinion. How powerful does Noelle-Neumann think the broadcast media are?

I have never found a spiral of silence that goes against the tenor of the media, for the willingness to speak out depends in part upon sensing that there is support and legitimation from the media.¹¹

Thus Noelle-Neumann agrees with Stuart Hall's assessment (and pessimism) concerning the media's intrusive role in democratic decision making. She ascribes a function to the media that goes one step beyond agenda setting. The media in general and television in particular not only tell us what to think about, they provide the sanctioned view of what everyone else is thinking.

Given the media's role in crystallizing public opinion, media access becomes crucial for those who desire to shape the public mood. It's no longer enough for potential opinion leaders to have well-thought-out positions and the courage of their convictions. They must be ready, willing, and *able* to command media attention. This gives anybody with an assault rifle, friends in high places, or inherited wealth an advantage over the average citizen in programming that quasi-statistical organ that readers and viewers possess.

As an example of a false consensus promoted by the media, Noelle-Neumann cites the negative attitude of her country's journalists toward the overall German character. In the 1950s and 1960s, commentators consistently bad-mouthed German materialism, rudeness, and love for authority. These and other negative stereotypes permeated the media. Data from the Allensbach Institute show that the continual pounding took its toll. The Institute's annual survey included an item about the German character: "Generally speaking, what do you consider to be the best qualities of the German?" In 1952 only 4

percent of the people answered, "Don't know of any." That figure rose to 14 percent in 1962. By 1972, 20 percent of the people were unable to voice a single positive trait. Noelle-Neumann concludes that the mass media can make a majority look like a minority. Television transmits public opinion; television also creates it.

DUAL EVIDENCE: SURVEY RESEARCH AND CLASSIC AUTHORS

The German character survey is only one of many research studies that Noelle-Neumann presents to support a spiral of silence explanation of how fads in fashion, ideas, and politics can take hold. Most of the studies involve reports of German attitudes toward issues and politicians unfamiliar to North Americans, but researchers in the United States have collected similar supporting data. For example, University of Wisconsin researchers Carroll Glynn and Jack McLeod discovered evidence that bolsters a spiral of silence interpretation of Ronald Reagan's surprising landslide victory referred to at the start of the chapter.¹²

Noelle-Neumann suggests that portions of the spiral of silence have been recognized by philosophers and social historians throughout the last few centuries. She draws upon the insights of Enlightenment thinkers Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Goethe, and James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* to illustrate the force and consolidation of public opinion. She believes that Alexis de Tocqueville's nineteenth-century analysis of the decline of religion before the French Revolution was the first to describe the entire spiraling process:

People still clinging to the old faith were afraid of being the only ones who did so, and as they were more frightened of isolation than of committing an error, they joined the masses even though they did not agree with them. In this way, the opinion of only part of the population seemed to be the opinion of all and everybody, and exactly for this reason seemed irresistible to those who were responsible for this deceptive appearance.¹³

CRITIQUE: QUESTIONS AT THE CORE OF THE SPIRAL

University of Chicago sociologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi regards Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence as "the most original, comprehensive, and useful" theory of public opinion yet proposed.¹⁴ Yet he and other scholars raise serious questions about specific parts of the theory that they consider overly simplistic. For example, progressive silence may be the typical response of those who see themselves outnumbered, but how often are people really convinced that they hold a minority view? Critics of Noelle-Neumann's theory suggest that she is overly optimistic about the human faculty to assess the public mood. Instead of labeling social perception as an "uncanny gift," they think the words *pluralistic ignorance* are more appropriate.¹⁵ The term describes people's mistaken assumption that everyone thinks like they do. Those who share the dominant opinion tend toward arrogance; those in the minority are guilty

of wishful thinking. But both groups think that more people share their opinions than really do.

Noelle-Neumann agrees that people lose their quasi-statistical talent if they “crawl into a hole” to avoid disturbing ideas, but she sees this kind of behavior as the exception rather than the rule. It’s unclear at this point who is right. Pluralistic ignorance could explain why followers of Pat Buchanan were convinced that their candidate would win the 1996 Republican nomination for president if only the “silent majority” of true conservatives would stand up and be counted. (It’s now apparent that no more than a third of Republicans—a “sizable minority”—supported Buchanan’s brand of conservative populism.) Yet if pluralistic ignorance is a widespread reality, its existence undermines a basic assumption of Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence.

Critics also point out that there are people who will never be silenced by threats of isolation. Even though their cause appears hopeless, they continue to voice their opinions—whether through conviction or obstinacy. Noelle-Neumann acknowledges that a vocal minority remains at the top of the spiral in defiance of threats of isolation. She refers to these outspoken believers as “*hard-core* nonconformists.” Although she suggests no way to identify these stubborn folks ahead of time, her 1991 update of the spiral of silence theory tries to clarify the nature and the role of these hard-core advocates.

Csikszentmihalyi asks, “Are these individuals idiots without a sense of shame, or are they persons with superior self-confidence who are relatively independent of social approval?”¹⁶ Noelle-Neumann’s answer is that the resolute hard core is not composed of secure people with especially deep-seated beliefs. Rather they are “a minority who have been overpowered and relegated to a completely defensive position in public.”¹⁷ (Her words might well describe the few U.S. liberals who remained publicly outspoken in the wake of the 1994 conservative congressional avalanche.) They are willing to speak out because they have nothing to lose. By clinging to the past, they’ve already been isolated. Despite this less-than-flattering assessment, Noelle-Neumann regards these stubbornly vocal deviants as the only hope for future swings in public sentiment.

The chance to change or mold public opinion is reserved to those who are not afraid of being isolated. By saying and doing the unpopular, by shocking, they . . . can carry their ideas to supremacy.¹⁸

French social-psychologist Serge Moscovici agrees with Noelle-Neumann’s assessment, but he doesn’t believe she does justice to the pervasive impact of committed deviants on public opinion. Moscovici has spent his professional life explaining how opinions and attitudes of the majority are susceptible to change by the influence of a minority that stands firm. He considers Noelle-Neumann’s discussion of a hard-core minority an afterthought or “finagle factor” to cover the times when the main features of her theory fail to account for shifts in the public mood.

But for Noelle-Neumann, hard-core advocates are exceptions. Most of us slide easily down the spiral of silence. As nonconformist Henry David Thoreau

wrote about his own civil disobedience: "It is always easy to break the law, but even the bedouins in the desert find it impossible to resist public opinion."¹⁹

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. How does Noelle-Neumann's definition of *public opinion* reflect the basic assumptions of her *spiral of silence*?
2. Is our hypothetical *quasi-statistical sixth sense* better at picking up current public opinion or predicting future public opinion? What is the rationale for your answer?
3. According to Noelle-Neumann's *train/plane test*, under what circumstances would you expect it likely that a person would remain silent about a controversial issue?
4. Have you ever been part of a vocal *hard-core* minority? How did you resist the *force of public opinion*? Did you consider yourself to have:
 - a) no sense of shame
 - b) superior self-confidence
 - c) nothing to lose
 - d) none of the above

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Theory of Public Opinion: The Concept of the Spiral of Silence," in *Communication Yearbook 14*, James A. Anderson (ed.), Sage, Newbury Park, Calif., 1991, pp. 256–287.

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Chapter 30: Spiral of Silence

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