An Analysis of the Spiral of Silence Theory on People’s Willingness to Express their Political Opinions

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Abstract

People are afraid of being isolated. Hence, fear of isolation influences people’s willingness to express their opinions to the public. When people are afraid of being isolated, they will not express their opinions, which they perceive as the minority opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). However, some groups of people are not willing to conform to public opinion. This paper aims to explain the power of public opinion on people’s willingness to express their political opinions, to summarize and criticize studies using spiral of silence theory in explaining people’s expression of opinions, and to provide conclusion and recommendations for future direction. The spiral of silence theory will be used to explain the power of public opinion.

Keywords: spiral of silence, mass media, political opinions, public opinions, social isolation

Noelle-Neumann initiated the idea of the spiral of silence for explaining the power of public opinion on people’s expression. The major premise of this theory is that people are reluctant to express their opinions that are opposed to perceived majority public opinion because of fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974: 43). She asserted that fear of isolation is a crucial variable, which is “an integral part of all processes of public opinion.” This paper seeks to explain the spiral of silence theory, to summarize studies using spiral of silence theory in explaining people’s expression of political opinions, and to provide recommendations for future direction.

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Noelle-Neumann (1974) proposed five major assumptions of the spiral of silence theory. First, people form a picture of the majority opinion. Second, their willingness to express an opinion depends upon what the majority opinion is. Third, people become less willing to express what they perceive as the minority opinion when they think that most people hold the majority opinion. Fourth, this becomes a situation where the actual opinion reduces over time. Fifth, the opinion that is perceived as the minority can develop into the majority opinion when it is anticipated to be the majority opinion in the future.

These five assumptions are based on Noelle-Neumann’s studies in 1971 and 1972. She employed multi-subject surveys involving structure interviews with population in Germany. She found that the degree of willingness to express opinions on controversial topics differed by gender, age, occupation, income, and residence. Men were more likely to express their opinions on controversial issues than were women. Younger people were more likely to express their opinions than were older people. Also, people who had high income and lived in large cities were more likely to speak out than were people with low income who lived in rural areas (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

**Fear of Isolation**

One of the most crucial factors that increase the power of spiral of silence is fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann. 1974 and 1993). Human beings are afraid of being isolated. Thus, fear of isolation influences people’s willingness to express their opinions to the public. When people are afraid of being isolated, they will not express their opinions, which they perceive as the minority opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Nevertheless, some groups of people are not willing to conform to public opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1974: 48) called this group of people, “hardcore,” who were “not prepared to conform, to change their opinions, or even to be silent in the face of public opinion.” Unfortunately, she did not include a hardcore group in her analysis, which led to many critiques of her works pertaining to the issue of individual differences.

Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) concept of fear of isolation was influenced by Solomon Asch’s E. (1951) “length-of-line” experimental study in 1951. The method of Asch’s length-of-line experiment was to assign participants judging whether one of three comparison lines matched a standard line. Under group pressure by confederates during the experiment, most participants conformed to the majority
opinion even though they had a suspicion of false judgments by the majority of confederates.

Asch (1951) revealed that people who were in stressful situations would conform to the group pressure. They were afraid of being ignored and isolated by the group. Later, Asch’s (1951) idea of fear of isolation became Noelle-Neumann’s major factor to explain the power of public opinion in the spiral of silence theory.

It is possible that cultures may influence the way in which people express their opinions to the public. For example, people from collectivist cultures (e.g., Thais) tend to focus on group interests, whereas people from individualist cultures (e.g., Americans) tend to emphasize individual interests (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Thus, Thais may be less likely to express their opinions, which they perceive as the minority opinion because they may be afraid of being rejected from the group. On the other hand, Americans may be more likely to express their opinions even though they know that they may be rejected from the group because of their minority opinions.

**The Role of Mass Media and the Spiral of Silence**

Noelle-Neumann (1991: 276) assumed that mass media accelerate the spiral of silence process. She perceived the powerful effects of mass media portrayal on public opinion. She stated, “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.”

According to the spiral of silence theory, mass media are viewed as sources of information for people to make inferences about public opinion. Also, media play a forceful role to make people perceive what issues are the majority and the minority opinion. Through these mass media functions, Noelle-Neumann (1991) went beyond the concept of the media’s role in the agenda-setting approach by pointing out that mass media not only tell people what to think about, but also tell them what the public is thinking.

**Criticizing the Spiral of Silence Theory**

Several scholars criticized several key variables such as fear of isolation and the powerful role of mass media in Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Griffin, 1997; Scheufele, Shanahan, and Lee, 2001; Vincent & Scott, 1990). Noelle-Neumann assumed that people usually yielded to the power of public opinion because of fear of
being isolated. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) raised the issue about individual differences on public opinion expression. The willingness to express the opinion might not rely on fear of isolation variable. Other variables might influence people’s willingness to speak out to the public. He stated that people differed in their responsiveness to social influences and pressures. Some people might be more sensitive to social influences than others. Thus, individuals’ reactions to public opinion might not be similar among those individuals. He also asserted that even though human beings are generally afraid of being isolated, individual differences in psychological traits made them differ in their willingness to express the opinion.

Vincent and Scott (1990) questioned Noelle-Neumann’s fear of isolation concept. They argued that this concept was based on the conformity of the majority opinion in small group experiments. The results from small group experiments might not represent actual public opinion, which generally took place in mass communication settings.

Additionally, Vincent and Scott (1990) contented the role of mass media portrayals on public opinions in the spiral of silence theory. The spiral of silence theory assumes that the effects of mass media on public opinion are repetition, ubiquity, and consonance (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). According to Vincent and Scott (1990), this assumption poses the problems of generalizability of spiral of silence theory into questions: Can media portrayals on public opinion in one country be ubiquitous to other countries? Along the same line, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) suggested that the formation of public opinion in politics was diverse from country to country. Thus, public opinion in one country might not apply or be relevant to other countries.

In the next sections, studies relating to the spiral of silence concept and the expression of political opinions are reviewed. Also, conclusion and recommendations for future research are provided.

**Reviewing Studies: People’s Willingness to Express Political Opinions**

Glynn and McLeod (1984) investigated people’s willingness to express their opinions on candidates during the U.S. Presidential election in 1980. They measured both participants’ anticipation of voting outcome and their actual voting behavior. They classified participants into three groups: hardcore, nonhardcore, and leaners. The results revealed that all groups of participants were more likely to express their opinions when they were in
a congruent political discussion than in a noncongruent one. In addition, participants who perceived a candidate to be a winner tended to express a preference for that candidate. Participants’ anticipations of their voting outcomes influenced both voting preferences and actual outcomes. Participants in this study not only expressed preference for Carter, they also reported voting for him (Glynn & McLeod, 1984).

Willnat (1995) examined participants’ willingness to express their political opinions pertaining to Hong Kong’s political future. Willnat investigated people’s willingness to express their opinions on the issues of the Sino-British disagreement for political future and Legislative Council election in Hong Kong in 1995. Consistent with the spiral of silence theory, participants were more likely to express their political opinion when they perceived their opinions were the majority opinion and when they anticipated that their opinions would be supported (Willnat, 1995).

To examine the spiral of silence theory, McDonald, Glynn, Kim, and Ostman (2001) conducted a secondary analysis of the 1948 Presidential election by using the data collected in Elmira, New York. They investigated several concepts in the spiral of silence such as opinion expression, social isolation, environment of opinion, and hardcore individuals. Generally, the results supported the spiral of silence concepts. Consistent with Glynn and McLeod’s (1984) and Willnat’s (1995) findings, non-hardcore individuals were more likely to express their opinion when they perceived a trend of support for their opinions than did hardcore individuals. Also, the degree of fear of the social isolated was negatively correlated to opinion expression. In short, people who were more likely to be afraid of being isolated were less likely to express their opinions.

Several studies using the spiral of silence theory to explain people’s expression of political opinions have been conducted in many countries. However, little is known on how Thai people express their political opinions to the public. This area of study needs further exploration. Applying the spiral of silence theory to explain Thais’ willingness to express their opinions (e.g., political, social, economic issues) helps us understanding how Thais express their opinions to the public, friends, and coworkers, which groups of people will be more likely to express their opinions, and how individual differences and cultures influence the way in which Thais express their opinions.
Conclusion and Recommendations

The spiral of silence theory reflects a fundamental social psychology of individuals’ cognition and behaviors. Human beings are fearful of being isolated, ignored, and excluded. Public opinion is not always as powerful as Noelle-Neuman described. Many people conform to public opinions because of fear of isolation. They will not express their opinions when they perceive them as the minority opinion. However, some people are not afraid to express their opinions even though they perceive their opinion as the minority view. People are different in many respects including traits, perceptions, and opinions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Future studies should include individual differences as another variable to examine people’s perceptions and their willingness to express political opinions. Examining the influence of individual differences on the willingness to express opinions to the public helps us understand why some people are more likely to speak out on controversial issues and are not afraid of being rejected from their group members, whereas some people are less likely to reveal their opinions because of being afraid of rejection by the group.

The problem of generalizability of spiral of silence concepts has been addressed in many studies (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Scheufele et al. 2001; Vincent & Scott, 1990). Future studies should explore people’s expression of their opinions in various countries in order to understand the role of mass media in portraying public opinion in countries, where political climate is different.

Also, another avenue is to use a variety of data collection methods in testing the spiral of silence theory. Scheufele et al. (2001) asserted that a spit-ballot technique including survey research and focus group discussions should be more likely to obtain people’s actual perception of opinions and their willingness to speak out when compared to only survey research.

The spiral of silence theory would be the appropriate theory to explain the expression of political opinions among Thai people. As mentioned previously, collectivist cultures such as Thailand tend to value group interests. Generally, Thais tend to comply with their group opinions. They are more likely to express their opinions when they believe that their opinions will be supported by their group members. Fear of isolation and rejection may affect how Thais reveal their opinions. Nevertheless, not all Thais are afraid of rejection by the group. Some groups of Thais (e.g., scholars and high income) were
more likely to speak up about the controversial issues (e.g., tax-exemption allegations of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the CTX bomb-scanners scandal at Suvarnabhumi Airport) than were other groups of people (e.g., low income and grass roots). The questions are whether or not minority opinions will influence majority opinions and whether or not fear of isolation will keep Thai people from being honest and open about their opinions.
References


