

THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION
AND PUBLIC OPINION

EDITED BY WOLFGANG DONSBACH,
CHARLES T. SALMON, AND YARIV TSFATI

THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

Since its original articulation in the early 1970s, the spiral of silence theory has become one of the most studied theories of communication and public opinion. It has been tested in varied sociopolitical contexts, with different issues and across communication systems around the world. Attracting the interest of scholars from communication, political science, sociology, public opinion, and psychology, it has become both the subject of tempestuous academic debate as well as a mainstay in courses on communication theory globally.

Reflecting substantial new thinking, this collection provides a comprehensive examination of the spiral of silence theory, offering a synthesis of prior research as well as a solid platform for future study. It addresses various ideological and methodological criticisms of the theory, links the theory with allied areas of scholarship, and provides analyses of empirical tests. Contributors join together to present a breadth of disciplinary and international perspectives. As a distinctive and innovative examination of this influential theory, this volume serves as a key resource for future research and scholarship in communication, public opinion, and political science.

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New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion

*Edited by
Wolfgang Donsbach, Charles T. Salmon,
and Yariv Tsfati*

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1

THE LEGACY OF SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY

An Introduction

Wolfgang Donsbach, Yariv Tsfati, and Charles T. Salmon

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann passed away on March 25, 2010, at the age of 93. Her death ended a highly visible career as a social scientist, an entrepreneur, a political consultant, and a journalist not only in Germany but internationally as well. She was a professor of communications (at the University of Mainz) and one of the first to introduce empirical methods to German communication research. She was the owner of the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, an economically successful and methodologically innovative survey and marketing research firm. She was a political consultant who, from the very beginning of post-war Germany, supplied evidence on the Germans' public opinion to the chancellors from Adenauer to Kohl and Merkel. And she was a journalist, in her first career during the Third Reich, and afterwards as what she called a "survey research correspondent" (*demoskopischer Korrespondent*). But her name will primarily be remembered, at least among academics, as a theorist and specifically as the author of the spiral of silence theory.

There have been many controversial discussions in publications, at conferences and in seminars about this theory. But there is certainly accordance, even among the most ferocious critics of this theory, that it has been one of the most influential of all theories developed in communication research and political communication over the last half century. "Influential" can, of course, mean very many different things. What makes a theory influential? We believe that there are five criteria: recognition, acceptance, integration, evidence, and practical relevance. How does the spiral of silence theory fare on each of them? This book's objective is to address this question. Each of the chapters will speak to at least one of these aspects from different perspectives and with different results. Here we will explain these dimensions, summarize the issues and the evidence, and link them with the chapters that follow.

Recognition

Statistical Evidence

One measure of a theory's recognition by a field is the number of times it is cited, with the caveat that recognition does not necessarily imply acceptance. Indeed, a review of the spiral of silence 20 years ago concluded that the theory was spawning as many critiques as empirical studies (Salmon & Moh, 1992). As of the time of writing the present chapter, Google Scholar showed that Noelle-Neumann's most cited journal article in English (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) has been cited more than 700 times, while her English language book (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) had been cited more than 1,200 times. To put these figures in an order-of-magnitude context, Google Scholar at the same time listed more than 40,000 citations for Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations*, more than 4,000 citations for McCombs and Shaw's (1972) seminal journal article on agenda setting, and more than 400 citations for Ball-Rokeach's and DeFleur's (1976) original article on media dependency theory.

To get a better sense of the impact of the spiral of silence within and outside the discipline of communication research, we examined a sample of 500 works citing Noelle-Neumann (1974) in Google Scholar. Examining the national, disciplinary, and intellectual identity of the authors citing Noelle-Neumann is telling when one wishes to discuss the impact of spiral of silence theory. Of the 142 communication journal articles citing "spiral" in our sample of 500 items (that included in addition books, dissertations, conference papers, and journal articles from other disciplines), 66 (47%) were empirical quantitative papers, while the rest did not include quantitative data. Only 41 (29%) were published in traditional political communication and public opinion outlets, such as *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, and *Political Communication*. Very many of the articles citing Noelle-Neumann's 1974 *Journal of Communication* article and appearing in general communication journals such as *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Theory*, or *Communication Research* dealt with media effects in the political context.

But this is not to say in any way that "spiral" is only useful for political communication scholars. Out of the 142 citations to Noelle-Neumann in communication journals in our sample, 11 appeared in health communication journals, 3 in *Science Communication*, and 3 in the *Journal of Media and Religion*. The spiral of silence was also cited in *Strategic Communication*, *Media Psychology*, *Media, War & Conflict*, and *Visual Communication Quarterly*. Despite its reputation as an "administrative" theory (i.e. one that is of a practical value for influencing the political and social process), "spiral" has also been cited by journals highlighting critical, cultural, and rhetorical traditions such as *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Media Culture & Society*, *Communication Culture & Critique*, *Discourse & Society*, and *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Together, these references accounted for 11% of the citations to the theory in communication journals in our sample.

In terms of geographic reach, the 555 authors and coauthors of our sample of 500 citing items originate from 32 countries (based on their affiliation at the time of publication). Most authors citing the spiral of silence (63%) are North American (333 out of the 555 authors are affiliated with U.S. institutions). European scholars account for 23% of citations. Eight percent of the citations came from authors based in Australia and New Zealand, 3% came from Asia, 2% came from the Middle East, 1% from Central or South America, and only 2 citations from Africa. This distribution is quite similar to the global distribution of authors publishing in major journals in the discipline at large (Lauf, 2005). In any case, as far as one can tell from an examination of citation patterns, spiral of silence is much more than a German theory; only 17 (about 3%) of the articles citing spiral of silence were authored by scholars affiliated with German institutions.

Reasons for the Theory's Recognition

Why has the spiral of silence theory received such varied recognition in the field? We see mainly four reasons: Noelle-Neumann's publication strategy, the role of the theory within a historic paradigm change in the field, the theory's relationship to other theories, and its provocative character.

First, Noelle-Neumann practiced something that, in the 1970s and 80s, was highly uncommon for German and other European scholars whose first language was not English: she published her work almost simultaneously in her own language and in English, the only way one could (and still can) get recognition beyond the boundaries of one's own culture.

Her book on the theory first appeared in 1980. With Piper Publishing she chose not a primarily academic publisher but one who was known for offering serious non-fiction publications for a broader intellectual audience. Given her at that time well-established connections with the University of Chicago (where she taught as a visiting professor), she managed to get the English translation out already in 1984 as hardcover and 2 years later as paperback edition with the prestigious University of Chicago Press. Although later translated into 11 languages, it is this English language publication that brought recognition to the spiral of silence theory. She followed up on the book publication with two further English language articles in widely read publications, thus increasing awareness of her theory, although the tone of the academic discussions had already turned somehow controversial (Noelle-Neumann, 1985, 1991).

Noelle-Neumann's decision to seek international outlets for disseminating her ideas and findings early on was motivated by academic professionalism and strategy. Being well connected in international associations of the field like the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), or the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR, today called Media

and Communication Research), it was quite normal for her to think globally. Her peers were not restricted to the (then still small) community of German communication researchers. She traveled to conferences and talked to scholars all over the world, and therefore it was very normal for her to also address these international colleagues in her publications, which meant she needed to publish in English. Given the strong beliefs she had about the validity of her theory, it is probably also fair to say that she employed the English language publications as a strategy to get attention for her theory, recognition, and reputation. Second, as mentioned above, Noelle-Neumann's challenged the then-dominant paradigm of minimal media effects. As Denis McQuail writes in his chapter in this book, Noelle-Neumann not only "provided the slogan for the banner of paradigm change with the title of her article 'Return to the concept of powerful mass media' but offered theory and methods for investigating the posited effects." The spiral of silence theory, agenda setting, and cultivation, although very different in terms of reasoning and complexity, were well received by the field that had struggled for so long with results from media effects research that were, first, running against the researchers' intuitive assumptions, and, second, made the whole field somehow socially less relevant.

This identity crisis of communications as a field (Donsbach, 2006) and particularly its media effects research certainly contributed to the early awareness that the spiral of silence theory received among communication scholars. In her original articulation of the theory, Noelle-Neumann (1973) described mass media as ubiquitous and consonant, and media content as reflecting the political leanings of journalists who, as a group, were more liberal than the average citizen. She juxtaposed this view of mass media with the individual's interpersonal communication behavior in social settings (speaking up or being silent).

This points to a third reason for the awareness that the theory received, namely that it combines interpersonal communication with mass communication, macro and micro levels of analysis, content and audiences, sociology, and psychology. The theory offers insights for journalism scholars interested in media bias as well as for media psychologists interested in media effects, for cognitive psychologists concerned with individual perception, and for social psychologists interested in collective conformity. It carries important normative implications, but also offers hardcore statistical evidence, and practical relevance for the conduct and publication of public opinion polls. It is relevant for scholars studying communication and elections but also for those focusing on deliberative democracy. The fact that Noelle-Neumann highlighted the role of the spiral of silence in the transition from theories of limited effects back to theories of powerful media makes it a useful citation for scholars working on the history of communication research as well.

A fourth reason for attention to the spiral of silence theory is likely attributable to controversial publicity surrounding Noelle-Neumann herself and in particular her writings from the 1930s and 40s while studying in the United

States, completing her dissertation at the University of Berlin, and working for the newspaper *Das Reich* during World War II. This controversy stems from a line of criticism (e.g., Bogart, 1991; Simpson, 1996) that concluded that the impetus for the spiral of silence theory arose from Noelle-Neumann's work and insights during the Nazi era rather than from her work and insights as a social scientist and pollster in post-war Germany. Critic Leo Bogart (1991) accused Noelle-Neumann of supporting Nazi ideology and exhorted the scholarly community to shun and hence "silence" the spiral of silence theory. Christopher Simpson (1997) set up a Web-based archive to make Noelle-Neumann's most controversial writings from 1935 to 1945 a matter of public record, raising questions about her involvement in Nazi propaganda efforts. These criticisms and a subsequent high-profile termination of Noelle-Neumann's visiting professorship at the University of Chicago directed further attention, albeit negative, to her and to her research. The criticisms rarely, if ever, focused on contemporary scientific merits of the theory itself, but rather raised a series of critical questions about Noelle-Neumann's beliefs, responsibility, and writings as a citizen, student, journalist, and researcher living and working in the Nazi era and regime, and ultimately authoring a theory in which fear of one's environment—rather than enlightenment or empowerment—is viewed as the motivation for opinion expression versus silence. Criticisms and defenses of Noelle-Neumann's early professional career and writings have been aired and debated in academic conferences (most notably, the 1997 convention of the International Communication Association), the popular press (e.g., Honan, 1997; Miner, 1991), and the pages of scholarly journals (e.g., Bogart, 1991; Kepplinger, 1997; Simpson, 1997).

Acceptance

The spiral of silence theory is a bold theory. It claims to have roots in at least six more or less separate fields and it presents a provocation in at least four ways. Let us start with the intellectual roots.

Intellectual Roots

The first tradition to which Noelle-Neumann traced her theory's tradition back is descriptions of *public opinion*, if not with the term itself with the phenomenon, in political philosophy and literature. Already in her 1980 (in German) and 1984 (in English) book she spent several chapters presenting evidence for the claim that what she sees as public opinion (i.e., the socio-psychological phenomenon) had always been there, be it in the writings of political thinkers like Aristotle, Locke, and Hume or writers like the 18th-century Frenchman Choderlos de Laclos or the 20th-century Swiss novelist Max Frisch. Others who had dealt with public opinion, predominantly German sociologist Jürgen

Habermas in his “Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” (1962/1989), would just have dropped the ball by neglecting the socio-psychological side (that had been there for centuries) and reducing public opinion to its role of a social institution juxtaposed to government.

The second root is theories of *social perception*. As Noelle-Neumann’s theory claims that people have an ability to assess majority and minority opinions in their social environment, it finds itself in the neighborhood of other theories that either claim or refute this trait. The basic idea goes back to Cooley (1902/1983) who hypothesized that a person’s “self-idea” has three elements: an imagination of what we are to another person, an imagination of that person’s judgment of us, and some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification (see Eveland & Glynn, 2008). Being able to make such assessments or, as Noelle-Neumann coined it, having a “quasi-statistical sense,” docked on to general theories of pluralistic ignorance (most of which were developed at the same time, see Shamir’s Chapter 13, this volume) as well as those that explain the role of media in social perception such as to third-person effect (Gunther, Chapter 12, this volume), the hostile media phenomenon (see also Chapter 12 as well as Mutz & Silver’s Chapter 7, this volume), and even Gerbner’s cultivation theory (see McQuail’s Chapter 3, this volume).

A third and related root is the construct of *social control*. Again, Noelle-Neumann criticized the social sciences for having misled the field by renaming the most important aspect of “public opinion” to “social control” and thereby, first, separating it from the political realm, and second, dysfunctionally amputating the construct of public opinion. What sociologists like Edward Ross would describe as social control would be nothing else but the effects of public opinion, restricted to an apolitical sphere. Nevertheless, the sociological literature offered to her plenty of examples how the social control mechanisms were exerted.

A fourth root of the theory (and again related to the previous) is the *social nature of man*. In Noelle-Neumann’s writing this has three dimensions: our need for the presence of others, judgments in coordination and communication with others, and our dependence on the judgments of others about ourselves. The need for the presence of others is documented primarily in the “fear of loneliness” that can be traced back anthropologically and explained by evolutionary theory (see Csikszentmihalyi’s Chapter 19 in this volume). The role of others for perceptions and more so judgments had evidence in socio-psychological experiments like Sherif’s or Asch’s studies on group decision-making (see Fung & Scheufele, Chapter 11, this volume) or, more recently by Hardin and Higgins’ (1996) theory of “shared reality.” The strongest and most visible indicator of our emotional dependence on how others look at us is research on embarrassment, taken by Noelle-Neumann as a cross-cultural indicator for the social nature of man and the stress that this nature gets into when challenged by public opinion (see Chapter 18 by Ito and Chapter 7 by Mutz & Silver, this volume).

The fifth root of spiral of silence theory is *election research*. Being herself a pollster and in the business of election forecasts (through the Allensbach Institute), Noelle-Neumann was concerned with reasons for opinion changes and election outcomes. She reports that the “enigma” that she first found in the 1965 German general elections (and which she describes early on in her 1984 and 1989 books) is the key to her subsequent theory: Voting intentions stayed unchanged while the expectation about the presumed winner of the election (climate of opinion) had changed dramatically. Here, Noelle-Neumann developed the hypothesis that perceptions of others’ opinions might influence one’s own behavior thus explaining a phenomenon that had already been around in election research (i.e. the “last minute swing”).

The final root of the theory is, of course, communication research, and here particularly *media effects research*. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann was very much annoyed by the inability of communication research to find clear evidence for media effects (see McQuail’s Chapter 3 and Kepplinger’s Chapter 4, this volume). The role of the media in the spiral of silence theory (i.e., being one source for the perception of climates of opinion), was only one of several paths that she pursued in order to prove that the minimal effects paradigm was not the last word. Nevertheless, most of her projects centered round the question by what means the media can convey impressions of what is a majority/accepted and what is a majority/unaccepted opinion on a given issue.

Provocations

While it becomes clear that the complexity of Noelle-Neumann’s system of hypotheses offered many options for integration with other theories (see the section below), it also created many gateways for criticism. The most obvious one is the *theory’s breadth* (i.e. its nature of a macro theory), incorporating several of the existing theories in the social sciences. For many, this theory has carried a certain posture of arrogance, claiming that its author knew better and pointing out where other authors had misled the field. Moreover, Noelle-Neumann claimed that the evidence for what she holds true was there throughout scientific and philosophical history, making her arguments even harder to digest by other authors. Another feature of this boldness is the claim that the theory works across all cultures. This ran counter to many other theories, particularly popular in the second half of the 20th century, that human behavior is very much bound to specific cultural factors and that the “hard-wiredness” of man is very limited.

The second provocation is what is perceived by many commentators as Noelle-Neumann’s *concept of the individual*. The spiral of silence theory assumes that an individual withholds his or her opinion when confronted with a dissonant climate of opinion. This, of course, does not comply with the ideal of the citizen in democratic theory. But Noelle-Neumann faced the same problem of

the gap between norm and evidence as others in the business of media effects. The fact that the paradigm of minimal media effects, stipulated by the concept of selective exposure in the 1940s dominated communication research for more than 30 years (and often against existing evidence) can only be explained by the norm-reality phenomenon. This paradigm not only legitimized big-money media but also saved the image of man in society. As Katz (1987) wrote, “Lazarsfeld and company concluded that it is a good thing for democracy that people can fend off media influence and implied that the crowd may be less lonely and less vulnerable than mass society theorists had led us to believe” (S26–S27). The problem with Noelle-Neumann’s theory was and is that it had opposite evidence, that it showed man not to be as ideal as conceptualized in democratic theory. The problem of many commentators, on the other side, was the fact that they mistook empirical evidence as the normative conception of the author.

Spiral of silence theory also provoked because it was embedded in Noelle-Neumann’s *paradigm of powerful mass media*. While many authors (see McQuail’s Chapter 3, this volume) praise Noelle-Neumann for having contributed to a paradigm change and re-orientation of media effects research, the new paradigm was not embraced by all actors. Those scholars whose work stood for the opposite paradigm felt challenged by this new assumption. Journalists and media moguls who had fended off societal and political demands for more responsibility with the “no effects” notion, feared that new discussions about the role and the control of media would arise. Many heated discussions on Noelle-Neumann’s publications (particularly her publications on the role of television in elections) can only be explained on the basis of journalists’ problem of legitimacy.

Finally, the theory also provoked because of its applicability and *application to practical politics*. At least this was the case in Germany when the conservative Christian Democrats (to whom Noelle-Neumann was a public opinion consultant) focused their strategy in the 1976 campaign on the outspokenness of their followers. Many social scientists find problems with practical applications of theories and particularly with scholars getting personally involved, at least when such consultancy concerns conservative parties.

Critique

These provocations inherent in the spiral of silence theory probably have stimulated more scholars to grapple with it theoretically and empirically than would have been done with other theories. This motivation is still alive today—as this book and a recent special issue of the *International Journal of Public Opinion* show (see particularly the article by Lang & Lang, 2012). This is not the place to give an account of all the theoretical and empirical evaluations of the theory. Matthes and Hayes (Chapter 5, this volume) summarize what they call “the