

**Nigerian
Encyclopaedia of Mass
Media and Communications**

*Historical and Theoretical
Perspectives*

Volume 1

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An Analysis of the Concepts Assumptions and Propositions (CAP) of the Spiral of Silence Theory of Mass Communication

Introduction

In the words of Severin and Tankard (1991), spiral of silence is one theory that gives the mass media more power than many other theories. Spiral of silence was developed and advanced by Noelle –Neumann (1973) who, according to Severin and Tankard, argues that: The mass media do have powerful effects on public opinion but that these effects have been underestimated or undetected in the past because of the limitations of research.

Substantiating the theory, Noelle-Neumann, a German sociologist, posits that three characteristics of mass communication – its cumulating, ubiquity and consonance work together to produce powerful effects on public opinion. The spiral of silence model deals with the question of how public opinion is formed. Noelle-Neumann opined that the answer to the question lies in interplay between mass communication, interpersonal communication and the individual's perception of his own opinion in relation to others in the society.

The theory drew its source from earlier psychological thinking of Allport (1937) that one's own opinion is to a very large extent dependent upon what others think or rather upon what one perceives as the opinion of others. An essential idea underlying the spiral of silence approach is that most individuals try to avoid being alone in holding certain attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, every individual observes his or her environment in order to learn which views are prevailing or gaining strength and which are less dominant or declining. If an individual believes that his own views and opinions are among those in the latter category, he or she would be less inclined to express them, just because of the fear of isolation. Noelle-Neumann amplified this further by stating that:

The more individuals perceive these tendencies and adapt their views accordingly, the more the one faction appears to dominate and the other to be on the downgrade. Thus, the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent, starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one.

The propounder in one of her later studies in 1993, describes individuals as having a quasi-statistical sense organ by which they determine which opinions and modes of behaviour are approved or disapproved of in their environment, and which opinions and forms of behaviours are gaining or losing strength.

Theoretical Concepts

In the spiral of silence theory, the following concepts are advanced and discussed.

- i. **Public Opinion:** As expressed in the theory by Noelle-Neumann, public opinion is the aggregate views, opinions attitudes or behaviours expressed by every individual in the society in order to avoid self isolation in areas of controversy or change. In other words, public opinions according to the theorist are those attitudes an individual member of society expresses to avert the danger of isolating himself or herself.

- ii.* **Dominant Opinion:** This refers to the view or belief held by a majority or much larger number of individuals in the society. Dominant opinion is that which is approved and expressed more than any dissenting or contrary one.
- iii.* **Deviant/Repressive Opinion:** As used in the theory, this is contrary to the dominant opinion. It is that which individuals, either in dissenting minority or silent majority, are less inclined to express just because of the fear of isolation.
- iv.* **Dissenting Minority:** A much fewer number of people or individuals who hold beliefs and opinions that are contrary to the dominant opinion.
- v.* **Silent Majority:** A much larger number of people who are not vocal and expressive to impose a consensus on the public.
- vi.* **Pluralistic Ignorance:** In spiral of silence theory, this refers to situations in which many individuals fail to communicate private opinions to one another and come to feel that they belong to a dissenting minority. In fact, a majority may privately hold the same view, while allowing a powerful and vocal minority to impose a false consensus.

Theoretical Assumptions and Propositions

Noelle-Neumann fortified her postulation with the following assumptions and propositions:

- that society threatens dissenting minority or deviant individuals with isolation;
- that individuals experience fear of isolation continuously and that fear of isolation is pervasive;
- that fear of isolation causes individuals to assess climate of opinion consistently using their (individuals) quasi-statistical senses;
- that result of estimate affects behaviours especially expression or concealment of opinion;

- that people or individuals who believe they hold minority viewpoints on a public issue would remain in the background where their communication would be constrained;
- that people who believe they hold majority viewpoints would become more encouraged to speak; and
- that people seek the media to confirm their observation and then interpret their own observations through the media.

Mass Media and Public Opinion

In the spiral of silence theory, the perception of the individual is, of course, not the only force working. Mass media are another. What is the dominant view of the day is often defined by the media. Noelle-Neumann had mentioned three attributes of the mass media as necessary to the formation of public opinion. She explained that the cummulation, ubiquity and consonance of the media are interwoven factors that help in crystallising public opinion. According to her, ubiquity refers to the ability of the mass media to be everywhere, to dominate the information environment. Cummulation of message is about periodical repetition of the message that tends to reinforce its impact. Consonance, in the explanation of Noelle-Neumann, refers to the unified picture of an event or an issue that can develop and is often shared by different newspapers, magazines, television networks and other media. With amazing agreement and harmony among journalists and others involved in the message, these tend to be a 'sameness' to the contents. This limits the options the public may have for selective perception.

Noelle-Neumann demonstrated further that the more selective perception is being restricted, the more attitudes can be influenced or molded by the mass media. Additionally, the effects of mass media increase in proportion to the degree in which selective perception is made difficult.

Laying bare the role of mass media in the spiral of silence, Severin and Tankard wrote that the mass media play an important part in the theory because they (the media) are the source to which people look

to find the distribution of public opinion. According to Noelle-Neumann as documented by Severin and Tankard, the mass media can affect the spiral of silence in the following three ways:

- they shape impressions about which opinions are dominant;
- they shape impressions about which opinions are on the increase; and
- they shape impressions about which opinions one can utter in public without becoming isolated.

In the opinion of McCleneghan (1988), it is not correct to say that the media tell people what to think but it is clear they do tell people what to think about. The media play a great role in shaping public agenda. The goods they produce – advertisements, television programs, feature films, play a pivotal role in organising the images and discourses through which people make sense of the world. Consequently, people's perception of reality is a product of media representation and reality. Noelle-Neumann argues that the mass media play an important role when people are attempting to determine the majority opinion. She posits that many individuals alter and hold their opinions in line with those of the media and that the process of adjustment occurs frequently. According to her, media presentations (words and phrases) to people, afford them the opportunity and confidence to speak about a subject and form their opinions about it.

However, another force working in the spiral of silence process is the degree of support from people in an individual's environment. Noelle-Neumann argues that willingness to speak out on issues is influenced largely by perception of the climate of opinion. If the climate of opinion goes against a person, that person would remain silent and that the motivating force for this silence is said to be fear of isolation. As an individual remains silent, other people around would do so as well, and so mass media definitions and lack of expressed support for communication bring about the spiral.

Noelle-Neumann supports her model with references over time in several important areas of public opinion in the German Federal Republic and her evidence had strongly indicated a relationship among perceptions of majority opinion, expressions of personal opinion, tendencies in content and the opinions of journalists. According to her, under some conditions, the mass media appear to mould perceptions of the dominant opinion and thus influence individual opinions in the way proposed by the model.

Researches and Empirical Tests

What could be regarded as the earliest research conducted by Noelle-Neumann to substantiate the assumptions and propositions of the spiral of silence was the study conducted in 1972. It was an exercise conducted to ascertain instance of fear of isolation, dominant or majority group as well as deviant group. Among others, the following findings were substantiated:

- people live in perpetual fear of isolating themselves and thereby carefully observing their environment to see which of their opinions is decreasing or not being upheld by others;
- the predominance or increase of views make individuals to express themselves freely in the public;
- individuals become fearful and conceal their convictions in public and become silent when their views are losing support;
- individuals constituting the dominant group express themselves with self confidence;
- individuals constituting the deviant group express themselves by keeping silent; and
- people in the dominant group appear strong in public while those in the deviant group appear weaker than their number suggests.

Notwithstanding, Lasorsa (1991) had questioned the instances of 'fear of isolation'. He had tried to know whether the fear of a hostile climate of opinion (as put forward by Noelle-Neumann) is strong. He carried out a study to investigate the instances. He conducted a survey in which he tested whether political outspokenness is affected not only by one's perception of the climate of opinion but also by other variables such as age, education, income, interest in politics, level of self-efficacy, the personal relevance of the issue, individual's news media use and certitude in the correctness of his or her position. Using a regression analysis, Lasorsa discovered that outspokenness is being affected by the block of demographic variable (age, education and income), level of self-efficacy, attention to political information in the news media and certitude in individual's position but not by personal relevance of the issue or news media in general.

According to Lasorsa, the results show that people are not quite as helpless in the face of public opinion as suggested by the spiral of silence approach. Also Rimmer and Howard (1990) had attempted to test the key hypothesis of the spiral of silence that the mass media are used to assess majority opinion. They conducted a survey dealing with public opinion regarding PCBs (Polychlorinated Biphenyls), a toxic waste substance believed to be causing cancer. The researchers measured respondents' use of several types of mass media and also measured how accurately respondents perceived the majority opinion with regard to PCBs (the majority held the opinion that the test community should wait for further testing before taking action regarding PCBs). Rimmer and Howard found no relationship between media use and the ability to accurately estimate the majority position with regard to PCBs. Thus, the results do not support the mass media playing a major role in the spiral of silence.

Interestingly too, Severin and Tankard had quoted the research conducted by Salwen, Linand Matera (1994). The researchers studied the willingness of citizens in three communities to express their opinion on the issue of 'Official English'. They discovered that a general tendency for willingness to speak out is related to perception of national opinion and perception of national media coverage more than perception of local opinion or local media coverage on the issue.

The results provide mixed support for the spiral of silence approach.

Comments and Criticisms

One interesting question that had been commonly asked by critics of the spiral of silence approach is whether or not the theory represents real attitude change. According to critics, it may be that only the expression of ideas assumed to be deviant is hampered, and that under more favourable conditions, these opinions could rather quickly and unexpectedly reappear. The answer therefore depends on the definition of public opinion used, since for Noelle-Neumann, free expressions is an essential part of the concept of public opinion.

As the critics argued, it is extremely difficult to obtain satisfactory empirical confirmation of the theory and the hardest and most controversial part of any confirmation procedure has to do with the question of media consonance, and cummulation in respect of given opinion matters. It requires an elaborate and extensive analysis of media content to deal satisfactorily with the problem. In the words of the critics of the theory, the process of opinion formation represented by the model certainly occurs under some conditions and to some degree, but the extent of its occurrence is still not known.

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