



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Studies in Communication Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/scoms



Spiral of silence online: How online communication affects opinion climate perception and opinion expression regarding the climate change debate

Pablo Porten-Cheé*, Christiane Eilders

Department of Social Sciences, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 December 2014

Accepted 6 March 2015

Keywords:

Spiral of silence

Selective exposure

Online communication

Online diary

Climate change

ABSTRACT

This study tests the spiral of silence theory under conditions of online communication. It is argued that a preference for user-generated content may result in different perceptions of the opinion climate than a preference for mass media. This may also affect willingness to speak out in public. This study tested the effects of selective exposure to information regarding climate change in Germany. The individual media diets were derived from online diaries and content analyses. The findings show no support for the spiral of silence theory. Individuals who see themselves in the minority were even more likely to express their opinions.

© 2015 Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research. Published by Elsevier GmbH. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The dissemination of online media has changed how people obtain information on current events. One dimension of change involves the increased amount of content on offer. Traditional journalism used to be the only source of information accessible for a large audience, but new sources have emerged, as anyone can now provide information with unlimited reach. User-generated content (UGC) in blogs or on social network sites (SNS), as well as content contributed by political parties, nongovernmental organizations, social institutions, and companies, complements the mass media content in online media outlets and in legacy media such as print and electronic media. The quantitative expansion of content also relates to an increase in opinion diversity, since every additional user-generated item may present a unique perspective not yet addressed by the mass media (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). The changes in media content go hand in hand with changes in media exposure. The abundance and diversity of online communication facilitate selective exposure: little effort is required to select media content in accordance with one's personal opinions (Garrett, 2009). The more easily people can put together

distinct media diets in this manner, the more likely they are to lose touch with the issues, perspectives, and opinions being discussed by society at large.

This forms the starting point of our study. It is assumed that exposure to UGC results in different perceptions of the opinion climate and further results in different communicative behavior in public discourse than exposure to mass media. The causal relation between exposure to particular media content and opinion expression in public is the theoretical backbone of the spiral of silence concept put forward by Noelle-Neumann (1974) in her theory of public opinion. According to the spiral of silence, the perception of the opinion climate links cause and effect, thus guiding people's communicative behavior. Hence, the opinion climate or, more precisely, perception of the opinion climate, represents the key concept in research on the spiral of silence. We deliberately use opinion climate rather than public opinion because we distinguish between the aggregate of individual opinions in terms of majority and minority opinions and the normative concept of public opinion, which represents the theoretical reference point in research on the spiral of silence. Public opinion is a very complex and highly contested concept. It is crucial for all analyses contextualizing individual opinion formation in a society or relating it to collective phenomena (Habermas, 2006; Herbst, 1993). Noelle-Neumann (1974, p. 44) defines public opinion as an opinion one can express in public without fear of social isolation. This notion clearly addresses the normative dimension of what other people think. It does not necessarily reflect the perception of the aggregate of

* Corresponding author at: Department of Social Sciences, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Universitätsstrasse 1, 40204 Düsseldorf, Germany.
Tel.: +49 211 8110402.

E-mail address: pablo.porten-chee@phil.uni-duesseldorf.de (P. Porten-Cheé).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scoms.2015.03.002>

1424-4896/© 2015 Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research. Published by Elsevier GmbH. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Please cite this article in press as: Porten-Cheé, P., & Eilders, C. Spiral of silence online: How online communication affects opinion climate perception and opinion expression regarding the climate change debate. *Studies in Communication Sciences* (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scoms.2015.03.002>

individual opinions in terms of majority or minority. In contrast to the normative concept of public opinion, “climate of opinion” represents the more matter-of-fact term for what other people think. It is used widely (e.g., Scheufele & Moy, 2000), especially in empirical studies on the effects of the perceived distribution of opinions in a society on willingness to speak out.

From the perspective of the spiral of silence theory, the perception of the opinion climate is likely to inhibit people’s willingness to speak out in public (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) if an individual’s opinion contradicts his or her perception of the opinion climate. Our study investigates the role of the media, in particular, the role of UGC in this process by first asking how exposure to either mass media or UGC affects the perception of the opinion climate. Second, it investigates whether exposure to UGC or the fact that people hold minority opinions affect willingness to speak out in public. Third, it examines the effects of specific online conditions such as anonymity and low-threshold evaluations as modes for opinion expression. The research questions were addressed in an empirical study of the debate on climate change in Germany. It is important to note that Germany stands out by the large share of its population that assigns relevance to climate change and that does not doubt its anthropogenic origin (Engels, H tther, Sch fer, & Held, 2013). However, there is considerable variance in the German debate on climate change: media outlets as well as individuals in the audience have different perspectives on the issue; they highlight different aspects and hold different opinions regarding the possible solutions. Since climate change is framed in different ways, we assumed that the debate provides sufficient conflict to make it a case for testing the spiral of silence theory under online conditions.

2. Applying the spiral of silence to the online world

The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993) proposes that individuals fear social isolation and only therefore speak out in public if they perceive themselves to be in the present or future majority on an issue. In order to assess the climate of opinion, people closely monitor their social environment via the mass media. The effect of mass media content on people’s perception of the opinion climate represents the first part of the spiral of silence theory, while the assumption that climate of opinion perception affects willingness to speak out forms the second part of the theory. Because the opinion perceived as a majority opinion is expressed in public and the opinion perceived as a minority opinion is not expressed in public, a spiraling process is initiated in which the alleged majority opinion gains ground and the alleged minority opinion loses ground. Thus, the factual opinion climate can eventually be reversed, which means that at the end of the process, the former factual minority opinion can be expressed in public without fear of isolation because media tend to present this opinion as majority opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The spiral of silence mechanism explains how micro-level individual behavior, such as speaking out in public under particular conditions, might spill over to the macro-level of public opinion formation.

Because of its political sensitivity and the ample plausibility of its assumptions, the spiral of silence theory has sparked many follow-up studies across the world. The results varied with the cultural context, the operationalization, and the issue under investigation. In the overall picture, evidence supporting spiral of silence assumptions is rather weak. A meta-analysis by Glynn, Hayes, and Shanahan (1997) showed a significant average correlation of $r = .05$ between opinion congruence (between own opinion and climate of opinion) and willingness to speak out in 17 relevant studies. Further, there is evidence for alternative explanations: the silencing

effect can also be explained by the pluralistic ignorance approach, projection effects such as the looking glass effect, or the effect of peer group opinions (Fields & Schuman, 1976; Glynn & Park, 1997; Oshagan, 1996; Taylor, 1982). Some of the limited effects were attributed to violations of the conditions specified by Noelle-Neumann such as moral loading of an issue, the dynamic of the opinion climate for that issue, and the disregard of the time component (Bodor, 2012; Matthes, 2014; Scheufele & Moy, 2000). The difference in the operationalization of the key concepts was another reason frequently brought up to explain why it was hard to find consistent effects. Another explanation for the lack of sound evidence cited the doubts that individuals are actually able to gauge the opinion climate (Bodor, 2012). If people cannot gauge the opinion climate, they cannot estimate the degree of dissonance between their personal opinion and the perceived opinion climate. Consequently, the estimate cannot inhibit people’s opinion expression in public.

While most studies in spiral of silence research have dealt with the degree of reluctance to speak out in public, since this was considered to represent the key effect in the theoretical framework, only a few scholars have focused on the preceding perception of the opinion climate (Dalisay, 2012; Kim, Han, Shanahan, & Berdayes, 2004). This is particularly noteworthy because fear of isolation and monitoring the climate of opinion via the media represent essential concepts of this media effects theory and may be regarded as the premise for any effect on speaking out in public. Hence, the determinants of the perception of the opinion climate deserve special attention. Noelle-Neumann had specified consonance in the mass media as a condition for a spiral of silence to develop. This seemed reasonable, because only a unanimous media environment can be expected to shape people’s perceptions of the present or future dominance of a particular opinion.

Despite weak empirical support for the spiral of silence theory, its fundamental ideas remain compelling. The assumptions of the spiral of silence theory are a sound theoretical basis to further investigate the effects of media exposure on perception and discourse behavior (Schulz & Roessler, 2012). Serving as an important source of information, mass media content influences what individuals perceive as majority or minority opinion and affects whether they adapt their discursive behavior accordingly. Since the media environment has undergone a fundamental expansion through online communication, this paper asks whether different types of media use result in different perceptions and discourse-related effects. It aims to investigate the impact of online communication on the effects spelled out in the spiral of silence theory.

With the advent of online communication, media content previously used for monitoring the climate of opinion has changed considerably. The mass media have been complemented by online content contributed by users. In contrast to professional journalism, UGC comprises unfiltered individual opinions (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012; Wall, 2005), because it need not comply with common journalistic norms, for example, objectivity (see Schudson, 2001). We may assume a multitude of opinions also, because of the vast number of websites maintained by different organizations, e.g., social movements, which are particularly prone to experimentation (Della Porta & Mosca, 2009). Further, online content beyond the news sites of mass media, such as blogs or SNS, is unlikely to follow the mass media logic or reflect the corresponding routines of news selection. Rather, it can be assumed to follow the subjective and highly diverse individual preferences of its producers.

The unavoidable counterpart of the increase in information is therefore an increase in audience selectivity. Facing an abundance of new channels and an unmatched diversity of opinions, individuals who have turned to UGC for current affairs may either

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10256710>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10256710>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)