



Opinion expressions under social sanctions



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ABSTRACT

I study a social debate where individuals are subject to informal sanctions if their expressions or silence signal the opinions of a minority group. Individual preferences are peaked at the expression of true opinions and there is a loss of utility from keeping silent. The model generates predictions about how equilibrium expressions change as a function of model primitives such as sanction intensity, disutility of silence and size of the minority group. A dynamic extension sheds light on the limit distribution of opinions if unvoiced opinions gradually disappear while publicly expressed opinions gain new adherents over time.

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1. Introduction

In any society and time certain ideologies in politics, beliefs in religion, styles in arts, clothing and family life are considered unacceptable, or simply out of fashion. These norms deter deviants by legitimizing informal social sanctions that range from withdrawing sympathy and support to outright violence. As they vary in form and intensity, social sanctions can have important consequences. The fear of evoking scrutiny and criticism can shout out opinion expressions, leave unchecked the extreme variants of the dominant majority and, potentially, homogenize expressions. While diversity of expressions is generally praised for conducting productive social debates and better choices, circumstances exist in which censorship of certain types or forms of expressions might be beneficial – for example, silencing individuals who praise vandalism or terrorism. It is therefore important to identify the characteristics of media that favor anti-speech norms and strengthen social censorship, to improve our understanding as to why and whose expressions are likely to be distorted in a given social debate.

The static and dynamic effects of social sanctions on expressions is a live research area in political science, sociology and allied disciplines.¹ The related literature can be classified broadly

in two categories. The first line of research begins with the works of Schelling (1978) and Granovetter (1978) and applies critical mass models to study the social consequences of individual choices in topics such as collective action problems, voting, bank runs, and even revolutions.² The second line of research is a vast and growing public opinion and communication literature, based on Noelle-Neumann's (1974) *spiral of silence* theory of public opinion formation.³ Interdisciplinary and rich in ideas, this literature develops and tests hypotheses about determinants of public expression

citizens' demand. Glaeser (2005) provides an interesting account and analysis of hatred, strategically supplied and demanded at the group level. The study of the mechanisms by which social sanctions are applied is beyond the scope of this paper.

² These are discrete choice models with heterogeneous agents whose individual payoffs increase when others behave similarly. Over the past few decades they have been extended in several directions to study conformism, path-dependence of collective choices and related phenomena; examples include Akerlof (1980), Jones (1984), Kuran (1987), Olivier et al. (1985), Bernheim (1994) and Chwe (1999). Brock and Durlauf (2001) develop a generalized critical mass model with microfoundations. More recently, Benabou and Tirole (2006) offer an analysis of optimal incentive provision under pressures to conform in a continuum-agent model.

³ According to this view, the power of the majority to threaten minority expressions serves to achieve and institutionalize consensus. Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993) posits that individuals keep silent or conform when they perceive a climate of opinion that is hostile to their own viewpoint, lest they experience the negative consequences of supporting unpopular opinions. Experimental studies confirm the fear of isolation and sanctions in social settings. In Hayes et al. (2000), for example, when asked to select from a list of topics for discussion, subjects displayed great preference for a particular topic when their own opinion was more consistent with

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¹ The social sanctions targeting specific opinion groups can be complex and rooted in history; in some cases they are strategically nourished by political speech, upon

outcomes. It lacks, however, formal models based on explicit individual motives and choice, capable of generating a rich set of expression phenomena as equilibrium outcomes.

This paper develops a linear model of opinion expressions, similar in spirit to those of social conformity in the tradition of [Bernheim \(1994\)](#). Individuals can express any opinion of their choice or they can remain silent. The motivation to express an opinion is associated with expressive utility, peaked at expression of own opinion, whereas silence produces a psychic cost or a loss of integrity relative to freely expressing one's own opinion. Given a profile of expressions, individuals commonly perceived to hold the minority opinions which the orthodox majority considers intolerable can be subject to informal sanctions.⁴ The sanction per victim is assumed to be a decreasing function of the minority population. With these ingredients, the model delivers predictions about expression strategies and inferred opinions of the individuals. Who expresses what, who the silent, who the vocal and who the sanctioned are depend on the sanction intensity, the cost of silence, individual preferences over expressions and the relative size of the minority. I reformulate the results by linking the model's parameters to observable characteristics of debates and expression media. Finally, I comment on the model's implications regarding the evolution of the true opinion distribution under a reasonable assumption about the influence of public expressions on true opinions.

The model borrows elements from the continuum-agent models in [Kuran \(1987\)](#) and [Dharmapala and McAdams \(2005\)](#). In Kuran, agents motivated by reputational utility express one of the two extreme positions and determine the public opinion. Kuran is interested in conditions of policy continuation and sudden drastic shifts in public support that follow minor shocks, whereas Dharmapala and McAdams focus on the impact of formal and informal sanctions on crimes induced by hate speech. With respect to these works, the emphasis here is on the magnitude of distortions in expression strategies, explaining which opinions are absent, who speaks up and who is silenced on the opinion spectrum when social sanctions depend on the relative size of the target minority. Recent studies have demonstrated the relevance of silence when individuals experience a fear of isolation in expression media, including survey interviews where social pressures are considered minimal. As I show, the dynamics of equilibria with silence differ from those without silence because distorted conforming voices more than silence can contribute to the growth of conformism.

To highlight some of the model's predictions, in equilibrium sanctions can be ineffective on the minority if individuals perceive a large cost from remaining silent. The first whose strategies are to be affected by social sanctions and the first to disappear from public expressions are the majority neighbors of the minority, not the target minority group itself. Generally, the set of sanctioned expressions is never confined to the minority range – majority opinions that come sufficiently close to the minority are also sanctioned. A small dose of informal sanction generates silenced opinions by inducing the majority neighbors to distance themselves from the minority, thus building a gap between the expressions of the two camps. Public opinion scholars associate such small sanctions with “descriptive” or informational social norms. An example would be the mild social disapproval for expressions against recycling

policies.⁵ On the other hand, in an environment in which the social sanction and the cost of silence are both large, social pressures to conform are powerful, so, opinion misrepresentation is common and many opinions are absent. If the social sanction is large yet remains smaller than the cost of silence, I show that equilibrium expressions may even display a greater variety of minority opinions than majority opinions.

As [Harrison \(1940\)](#) argued long ago and these equilibria confirm, expressions are not exactly what people think, but what people are willing to publicly acknowledge they think. In this model the distribution of true opinions and the distribution of expressed opinions never coincide under positive social sanctions. Factors that lead to increases in the social sanction widen the expression gap between the two groups because majority members increasingly misrepresent their opinions to distance themselves from the minority. The model predicts that combinations of small minority, large sanction intensity and large cost of silence lead to full conformity of expressions with the orthodox majority views located at the opposite extreme of the minority. This could be the case in morally loaded debates like those involving racial politics where individuals feel strong pressures to moderate their racially conservative views.

The question as to when silence is preferred to some form of expression as an equilibrium individual strategy is interesting. The answer of course depends on social beliefs. For instance, if silent individuals are always inferred as minority members and subject to social sanctions, no individual would remain silent because truthful expression of own opinions would dominate silence, as remaining silent entails a psychic cost in addition. To discard equilibria in which individuals are artificially forced to express an opinion by fear of sanctions on off-the-equilibrium silence, I impose a “right to silence” condition on beliefs about the types of silent individuals. This condition allows majority members to become silent if they wish so, without fear of social sanctions. I show that under this condition in equilibrium a silent group always consists of the entire minority plus a range of majority neighbors. In other words, silence, though individually costly, becomes a sanction-free pooling outcome. Besides the belief system, the other key determinant of the identities of silent and vocal individuals is the magnitude of the social sanction relative to the cost of silence. Equilibria with silence emerge in debates involving a small minority and/or large sanction intensity, provided the individual cost of silence is not too large. An example to this kind of environment is opinion polls on socially difficult issues that touch upon punitive norms, in a medium of expression where “involvement obligation” is small, hence the cost of silence is small. If the silent respondents are wrongfully interpreted as indifferent or lacking an opinion while they overwhelmingly hold similar opinions which they prefer to hide, the resulting measure of public sentiment may miss a significant base and lead to an overstatement of support for a specific public action.

Finally, in a dynamic extension of the model I investigate the evolution of true opinions under the assumption that silenced opinions lose support, i.e., density, to voiced opinions. Assuming such a process at work, the model produces a rich set of possible evolutions of the true opinion distribution. In one of these, the minority group grows to the detriment of the majority and the sanction per victim diminishes over time. I argue that this outcome is plausible in a tolerant society debating a morally loaded issue, or, stated in terms of the model's parameters, under a large cost of silence relative to the social sanction. On the other hand, there are many circumstances in which social sanctions eventually lead some or all minority members to switch to the majority side. Minorities are

the popular opinion. See [Scheufele and Moy \(2000\)](#) for a critical evaluation of the extensive empirical literature.

⁴ Those who express specific opinions are punished for what they think or believe, not for what they express. One justification for this approach is that preferences or types, not present acts, determine future actions. For example, a speaker who reveals an extreme racist position may be subject to social sanctions because his type is taken as an indicator of his future behavior; the arguments in the speech are relevant to the extent that they correctly signal the type of the speaker.

⁵ See [Lapinski and Rimal \(2005\)](#) for a discussion and typology of social norms and informal sanctions.

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