Full length article

Inside the spiral: Hostile media, minority perception, and willingness to speak out on a weblog

Gi Woong Yun [a, *], Sung-Yeon Park [a], Sooyoung Lee [b]

[a] Department of Telecommunications, School of Media & Communication, Bowling Green State University, 302 West Hall, Bowling Green, OH 43403, USA
[b] Sogang University, School of Communication, GA204, Mapo-Goo, Sinsoo-Dong, #1, 121-742 Seoul, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study took a snapshot at the psychological process of spiral of silence in an online environment with South Korean college students as the study participants. In an experiment, a Weblog-embedded news article from a media source incongruent with one's political orientation, as opposed to the same article from a congruent media source, triggered hostile media perception, which in turn led to presumed influence of the online news article on others. The presumed influence on others became a basis for assessing the online climate of opinion and led people to view themselves as a minority against the online climate of opinion. The media source factor, in conjunction with user comments factor, also generated different levels of minority perception both online and in the general society. In contrast to the notion of spiral of silence, minority perception against the general society's climate of opinion increased rather than decreased willingness to speak out.

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1. Introduction

In contrast to Noelle-Neumann's introduction and follow-up essays that reminded us of its scope overarching the entire process of public opinion (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1991), spiral of silence theory has been rather narrowly defined in the social scientific research community. Scholars agree that there are many areas still in need of formal conceptualization and refined operationalization (e.g., Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Scheufele & Moy, 2000).

People's assessment of the distribution of public opinion widely known as an exercise of the "quasi-statistical sense" and the role of media in the spiral process are two of the most commonly mentioned areas that are crucial for further development of the theory. The two areas may also benefit greatly from connecting with a branch of media effect research that focuses on people's perceptions of media bias and their consequences. Media scholars have accumulated substantial knowledge on how people perceive media coverage of public issues and subsequently come to an assessment of public opinion. Albeit less frequently, they also extended their investigative framework by examining the effects of

the perceived public opinion on behavioral responses such as engagement in political discourses and other open expressions of political views.

Another limitation of existing spiral of silence research is its narrow focus on the relationship between willingness to speak out and its theoretical predictors while paying little attention to the process intervening between the two. The inconsistent and rather weak relationship between the major variables found in previous studies (e.g., Glynn et al., 1997; Lasorsa, 1991) may indicate a need for better understanding of the process and subsequent definition of boundary conditions.

The current study aims to tackle these issues by exploring the process in which people perceive their issue position as a minority by employing the quasi-statistical sense. In doing so, we focus on two sources individuals depend on to estimate climate of opinion and subsequent assessment of their position in the landscape of public opinion: direct environment and the mass media (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 155).

Although these theoretical concepts were developed before the age of Web 2.0, research has shown that the online environment is facilitating and extending the reach of political news from established media sources rather than supplanting it. In other words, the online platforms might be new, and yet most political news being circulated in the space originates from the same traditional news organizations (e.g., Xenos, 2008). In addition, little systematic

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differences were found between online and print news consumers in their news consumption behaviors and subsequent effects such as recall (e.g., d'Haenens, Jankowski, & Heuvelman, 2004). Under these circumstances, the unique features of the online environment such as anonymity and balkanization of political opinions (Sunstein, 2009) raised intriguing and important questions about online news consumers' perception of the tenor of media, climate of opinion perception, and willingness to speak out. To date, a few studies generated interesting results from exploring these concepts in the context of online news consumption (e.g., Yun & Park, 2011). However, to our best knowledge, no study directly examined the relationships among perceived tenor of media, presumed media influence, perceived climate of opinion, and willingness to speak out.

In this study, a Weblog is chosen as the environment in which individuals are exposed to both a mass media source and an interpersonal source. Weblogs today quite commonly embed news articles from the established media (Gamon et al., 2008). More often than not, they also feature user comment functions that allow ordinary visitors to express their views related to the blog content (Yun, Park, Holody, Yoon, & Xie, 2013). Thus, an online experiment is set up in which individuals are exposed to both sources of public opinion perception. Subsequently, their assessment of the climate of opinion and use (or non-use) of the comment function to express their view is observed to provide a snapshot at a process essential in the spiral of silence.

2. The media component of the spiral of silence theory

According to the original formulation of spiral of silence, the media play three major functions in formation and transformation of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 156). First, in their agenda-setting function, the media choose to bring out some issues and parties involved in the issues into the public arena and bestow legitimacy to them. Second, in a function yet to be named, the tenor of media influences individuals' perceptions of what can be said or done without danger of isolation, which is usually accomplished by conferring a dominant position to one side over its competitions by portraying it more favorably, sympathetically, or simply winning. Third, in the articulation function, the media provide words and expressions for the public to defend their positions and further persuade others.

2.1. Tenor of media

Although all of these are related to the wax and wane of the spiral of silence, the second function can be considered particularly crucial. Surprisingly, however, little empirical investigation has been conducted on it within the framework of spiral of silence. In fact, the term "tenor of media" itself is not defined well at all, in spite of its importance in the spiral of silence process. In a content analysis of German print media coverage of nuclear energy between 1965 and 1986, Noelle-Neumann operationalized tenor of media as a difference between the numbers of positive and negative statements about nuclear energy (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). Similarly, a couple of business scholars employed the term "tenor of media" to refer to the overall balance between positive or negative references to a company made by news media for an extended period of time (Pollock & Rindova, 2003).

The influence of tenor of media on public's assessment of climate of opinion is also one of the least developed areas of the theory. Indeed, Noelle-Neumann did demonstrate that German journalists in the 1970s had a political view substantially different from that of the general population and presented some evidence that German media exhibited notable support for one side over the

other on a few socio-political issues (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1991, p. 273; 1993, pp. 163–166). She also presented survey results that illustrated a clear difference between frequent viewers of political TV broadcasts and non-viewers in perceived climate of opinion (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 162). However, the process leading from exposure, as opposed to non-exposure, to news media to different perceived climate of opinion still remains unexamined under the framework of spiral of silence. Of particular interest in the current study is whether the tenor of media registers with individual members of the public and the perceived tenor influences their assessment of climate of opinion and willingness to speak out.

These uncertainties concerning tenor of the media and its influence on public opinion assessment, crucial media-related elements of spiral of silence theory, were not fully addressed in subsequent studies, either. The vast majority of the studies measured people's usage of various news media and used the media usage measures as predictors of personal opinion, perceived climate of opinion, and/or willingness to speak out, without examining either the actual tenor of media or audience perceptions of it (e.g., Eveland, McLeod, & Signorielli, 1995; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001).

2.2. Hostile media

The idea that people assess distribution of public opinions on a social issue based on their judgments of how news media cover the issue can be dissected into three perceptual processes. First, people judge media coverage of a given issue to have a certain tenor. Second, people speculate that the media coverage with a certain tenor influences others' opinions about the issue. Third, people assess overall climate of opinion based on the perceived media influence, along with other factors, by exercising their quasi-statistical sense.

There are media effect theories that correspond to each step of this process. Hostile media perception, applicable to the first step, is a type of contrast bias in which people perceive inconclusive or ambiguous information to be against their position (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). For more than two decades, the perceptual phenomenon had been observed on various issues covered by broadcast and print media (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). In recent years, hostile media effect researchers also demonstrated that the bias perception can be caused not only by issue involvement of people, but also by the media source in which a news report appears. Depending on people's preexisting attitudes toward media sources, a balanced news report delivered by a media source can be perceived biased either in favor of or against their position (e.g., Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2007; Coe et al., 2008). In the context of spiral of silence, hostile media perception would predict that people involved in a social issue see the tenor of media[1] as biased against their own point of view.

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[1] In this study, tenor of media and media slant are used interchangeably. Similar to tenor of media, media slant has not been formally defined. Instead, it has been broadly understood as generally preferential or more sympathetic treatment of one side over the other(s) by the media in their coverage of controversial issues. Slant was once defined by Entman (2007, p. 165) to "characterize(s) individual news reports and editorials in which the framing favors one side over the other in a current or potential dispute." However, he only did so in an attempt to distinguish media slant from bias to elaborate the concept of bias in framing. In contrast to Entman's definition that limited slant to individual reports, however, slant has been measured in both experimental and survey studies, which suggests that the term "slant" is applicable to cumulative overall coverage across time and different media outlets as well as to specific individual reports.