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**Understanding Public Opinion:
Theoretical Challenges in Spiral of Silence Research.**

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0. Introduction

The spiral of silence theory is a theory of public opinion which has been developed during the 1960s and '70s by German Survey Researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916-2010). The central ideas of the theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1984) can be condensed in three notions:

- Most humans are driven by fear of isolation, the fear to be shunned by others. This is the foundation of Noelle-Neumann's theory and often referred to as the *social nature of men*.
- To avoid being shunned by others, most people constantly assess the climate of opinion. They try to determine, which behaviour is appropriate and which opinions can be safely uttered. Moreover, respectively, they assess, which opinions should not be stated in public if one values one's social bond (Scheff, 1990).
- The perceived climates of opinion (and especially its changes over time) have an impact on what people do, show and say in public. The spiralling effect emerges when more and more people fall silent on an issue or opinion; this means that the visibility of an issue or opinion decreases, thereby causing more and more people to fall silent.

Spirals of silence rarely progress to an extent that makes an opinion vanish or confined to a very small section of the society (the "hard core", Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 12). However, as a matter of fact, the mechanism that Noelle-Neumann proposed can make a difference in election campaigns (Noelle-Neumann 1984, Katz & Baldassare, 1994, p. 10) or societal

conflicts, such as the use of nuclear energy (Noelle-Neumann 1991), abortion, or sexual orientations (e. g. Hayes, Shanahan, & Glynn, 2001).

Issues of public opinion can only create a spiral of silence if they have enough emotional potential to drive processes of social isolation. Other prerequisites (parts of a set of marginal conditions for theoretical predictions to come true) are a societal conflict with at least two camps, and (at least in modern societies) the mass media taking a stand (Roessing, 2010).

Considerable progress has been achieved over the last couple of decades. Researcher from all over the world put the theory to test, yielded a fair amount of additional information on structures of public opinion, and developed a broad variety of new methods for spiral of silence research (Roessing, 2009). However, spiral of silence research is a complicated business and there still is much work to do. There are open questions and unsolved puzzles in the field of epistemology (instable social reality makes it difficult to come to final conclusions, Roessing, 2006, 2010), as well as in methodology (Roessing, 2009, 2010). The present paper is dedicated to deal with *theoretical* challenges in spiral of silence research.

There are still uncharted areas on the map of public opinion theory. These remain uncharted for at least two reasons. First, Noelle-Neumann developed her theory for the analysis of political communication among (West-)Germans, having the aggregate in mind. Individual psychology or communication – which is not necessarily political in nature – played only a minor role in her research, as well as in the numerous attempts of other researchers to put her theory to empirical tests. Second, societies and media systems have changed considerably since 1970. The theory has just not been designed for multi-channel digital TV, online communication, and the manifold phenomena of media convergence of the past ten (and probably the upcoming ten as well) years.

This paper will address four of the most important and interesting challenges in spiral of silence research: The voting booth problem, the unresolved case of asymmetric public opinion, the size of suitable publics, and the functions of entertaining mass media.

1. The voting booth problem.

The *voting booth problem* is one of the oldest problems in spiral of silence research, yet still unsolved. The problem is this. How can public opinion influence election outcomes despite the fact that there is no public situation and no social control affecting the individual in the voting booth? This point was exposed in Salmon and Kline's (1985) analysis of the spiral of silence: "In a voting booth, [...], one would not expect conforming pressure to affect an individual's choice, because he or she is in private and his or her actions are not subject to the majority groups eye" (Salmon & Kline, 1985, p. 9). There has been little research on this problem and attempts to integrate it into the theoretical framework are few. Noelle-Neumann's (1985, pp. 88-90) answer to Salmon and Kline is somewhat inconclusive and seems to miss the point: Noelle-Neumann points out that people might be affected by public

opinion in survey research interviews, but not in the “polling booth” – thus contradicting the assumption that the spiral of silence can decide elections. Noelle-Neumann rejects (Noelle-Neumann, 1985, pp. 83) Taylor’s (1982) measurement of speaking out by asking for the willingness to donate for a cause, because donating is no public act. Since the same problem exists with the voting booth, an answer exceeding the field of election forecasts would have been desirable. However, Noelle-Neumann at least proposed a way in which scientists could direct their efforts to shed light on the social nature of man: Individual psychology and neurosciences (Noelle-Neumann, 1985, p. 75; Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 100) are invited and encouraged to fill in this gap of understanding public opinion as social control.

It is of utmost importance in this process to avoid the dangers of so called “ad-hoc hypotheses”; social scientists are, as well as natural scientists, obliged to deliver a method for testing along with the proposal for patching theoretical flaws (Popper, 2002, pp. 61-63). Any notion of some strange non-conscious force being at work in the voting booth bears the risk of being “ad-hoc” and therefore unscientific. Therefore, the author of the present paper proposes – in addition to the neuroscientific approach mentioned above – to delve more deeply into the question how, and to what extent, public opinion alters actual attitudes vs. superficial behaviour (Kelman, 1961; see also Salmon & Kline, 1985, pp. 9-10). A greater number, more detailed, and a considerable variation of empirical observations are imperative to fix this theoretical problem. This should be one of the focuses of future research.

2. Asymmetric public opinion

The theory of public opinion is based on opposing camps, struggling for a value-laden issue. Classical examples are conservatives against social democrats (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, 1985), supporters and opponents of nuclear energy, or the appointment of left-wing extremists as judges (Noelle-Neumann 1991). But what happens, if one camp is very active on a conflict, committed, treating the issue as an affair of the heart – while the other camp is only marginally interested? Especially when the active group is a minority, being aware of their status, results that contradict the spiral of silence are to be expected. Noelle-Neumann used the Term “silent majority” for phenomena like this (Noelle-Neumann 1984: 23; 93), but she ascribed it mainly to media effects (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 15), which need not necessarily be at work here.

Jacob Shamir found in his study on the peace process in the Middle East that involvement should be considered as a moderator variable in processes of public opinion:

„In all regressions the most potent variables are indicators of involvement in politics, measured by general tendency to participate, knowledge, and the intensity of one’s position on the issue of contention [...]“ (Shamir, 1997, p. 609).

Other researchers later integrated this idea into their *empirical* research. Scheufele and Eveland found political commitment to interact with willingness to speak out publicly (Scheufele & Eveland, 2001, p. 30, 35, 40). Another study revealed that there might be a relation between commitment to the environment, media use, and the perception of the climate of opinion (Major, 2000, p. 232). However, these findings have never been systematically integrated into the set of hypotheses, the spiral of silence theory consists of. Since this is difficult and requires a more stable empirical basis, it cannot be done here, but has to be the aim of a separate paper. Maybe Shamir's conclusion could be a good starting point for this endeavour:

„Fear of isolation may be operating on some, but others maybe driven by a need to express their deeply cherished values especially when in jeopardy, so as to define themselves and convince others. [...] One may argue, however, that morally loaded debates are likely to evoke in addition [to a spiral of silence] strong value expression motivations which may contrast social pressures“ (Shamir, 1997, p. 610).

3. Does size matter?

The possibility of *regional or local processes of public opinion* has never been researched in detail. The spiral of silence theory was developed around analyses of voting behaviour and for the analysis of nationwide issues. Noelle-Neumann has always been very reserved against the idea of a plurality of public opinions within one society. And she was eager to emphasize that public opinion has little to do with group-dynamics, albeit similar processes of fear of isolation and social nature of men are at work in social groups. In fact, it is a quote which is frequently referred to in order to illustrate this social nature that addresses the immediate social environment of the individual (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 342):

“But no man escapes the punishment of their censure and dislike, who offends against the fashion and opinion of the company he keeps, and would recommend himself to. Nor is there one of ten thousand, who is stiff and insensible enough, to bear up under the constant dislike and condemnation of his own club.”¹

It is worth considering that there is a variety of opinions within one country towards one issue that one can publicly state without having to fear isolation. One example is the attitude towards the military, which presumably varies between leftist university towns like Freiburg (southern Germany) and large garrison towns like Munster (north-western Germany). Noelle-Neumann herself, together with Thomas Petersen, presented an example for localised public opinion in a textbook on survey methodology (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2005, pp. 570-573): The conflict about a nuclear reprocessing facility in Bavaria was confined to a small local area.

Adding to that, it is plausible that there are many local issues that are capable of triggering a spiral of silence process which is confined to a rather small area. In fact, some of the

¹ [http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/Book2c.html#Chapter%20XXVIII, §12](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/Book2c.html#Chapter%20XXVIII,%20§12).

empirical studies on the spiral of silence make use of this concept, e. g. “Willingness to Discuss ‘Official English’: A Test of Three Communities” by Salwen, Lin, and Matera (1994).

Further research on the minimum size of a “public” and the differentiation from group and family dynamics (e. g. Oshagan, 1996) seems necessary. And as is the case with the problem of asymmetric public opinion, an effort to integrate the available information on the question of local (as well as “world”) publics, into the spiral of silence theory, is desirable.

4. Entertaining mass media

Assumptions on the *functions of mass media* for processes of public opinion are mainly based on information-centred media content, but not on entertainment. This constriction is not only unnecessary, in fact it is disadvantageous for understanding public opinion: It is highly plausible that widely used entertainment formats are at least as effective in shaping people’s beliefs about acceptable public statements and behaviour as the news are.

Some newer studies address the use and effects of entertaining media content. For example, Patricia Moy, Michael A. Xenos, and Verena K. Hess found in their analysis of Late-Night-Comedy that these political shows can have a priming effect on the perception of election candidates (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006). Other Researchers found an effect of fictional stories about organ donation (within the shows CSI, Numb3rs, House, and Grey’s Anatomy) on viewers’ disposition to become organ donors (Morgan, Movius, & Cody, 2009). However, the exact ways by which entertainment interacts with politics, culture, other media content, and public opinion is still awaiting theoretical and empirical examination. As to the knowledge of the author of the present paper, there are no dedicated studies on the interaction between the spiral of silence and entertaining mass media.

This problem is at least partly new to spiral of silence researchers since the media environment has considerably changed since Noelle-Neumann developed the theory in the 1960s and ‘70s: At least in Germany, the supply with mass media channels providing entertainment (often of questionable quality) has skyrocketed in the meantime. Media change includes of course the completely new realm of online media: The theory of the spiral of silence has been developed to explain election outcomes of the 1960s. Thus, there are huge deficits in theoretical examination of computer mediated communication, e. g. online communities, networking platforms, or Wikipedia (Roessing 2007, 2008). There is evidence that processes similar to the spiral of silence can occur in online communities and affect the content of online media. Despite the fact that there is plenty of research in this area, the integration of the results into the spiral of silence theory remains a challenge.

5. Conclusion

The challenges in spiral of silence research are plenty. Adding to problems with epistemology and many unresolved obstacles in methodology there are four central areas in the theory itself waiting for clarification:

- Psychologists are invited to shed some light into the voting booth.
- Asymmetric public opinion might be a common problem and should be thoroughly delved into with the aim to integrate the phenomenon into the spiral of silence theory.
- Minimum size of a public that is capable of developing a spiral of silence should be discussed. Eventually the theoretical system of hypotheses should be amended by statements concerning the problem of different public opinions within the frame of one society.
- Content analyses, in combination with in-depth surveys of media use should address the question if entertaining mass media (as well as online media) can fulfil the functions of mass media in the spiral of silence theory to at least the same extent as informing media formats.

In five years the scientific community will have the opportunity to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Noelle-Neumann's discoveries that led to the spiral of silence theory. Maybe at least some of the theoretical challenges named in this paper will be on a good way to solution by then.

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