The Spiral of Silence – A Key Concept for Corporate Reputation Management

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Introduction

In 1974, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916–2010) first published her theory of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), of which the spiral of silence is the most prominent part (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Since then, this theory has sparked a considerable amount of research all over the world (Scheufele & Moy, 2000) and has recently been adapted for the internet age (Schulz & Rössler, 2012; Roessing, 2013). The theory is commonly used in political communication, for example to explain public opinion toward issues—e. g. nuclear energy (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, pp. 272-279) or biotechnology—, political parties, and political leaders (e. g. the president of the United States, cf. Katz & Baldassare, 1994). However, the theory is also highly useful to delve into the reputation of firms, brands, and business leaders. The application of the spiral of silence theory for reputation analysis is the main subject of this article.

Public opinion and the spiral of silence

Noelle-Neumann developed her theory of public opinion after she had made several puzzling observations during survey data analysis. One of these observations is the *last minute swing* in voting preferences in the direction of the expected winner of an election (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, pp. 258-259). The theory explains that swing by the many people's fear to avow themselves to the losing party.

The central assumptions and hypotheses of the spiral of silence theory are the following (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 45; Noelle-Neumann, 1991, p. 260; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, pp. 349-350):

1. Human beings usually fear social isolation.

2. Society tends to sanction inappropriate speech or behavior with social isolation. Minorities are thereby pressured to yield to majority positions.

3. Individuals constantly evaluate the climate of opinion in order to avoid social isolation in consequence of inappropriate public speech or behavior.

4. The mass media distribute information about majorities and minorities, define socially approved behavior, and provide arguments for public discussions.

5. When people notice that their opinion is losing ground, they tend to fall silent. This makes the affected opinion camp appear even smaller, silencing more and more of its own supporters. This part of the theory became famous as the spiral of silence. When it is finished, public opinion is established and only very few people (if any) hold on to the minority opinion (the so-called hard core). Figure 1 illustrates the course of a spiral of silence.

6. The latent (mostly unnoticed) function of public opinion is to resolve conflicts and hold societies together.

Figure 1: Schematic of a spiral of silence process
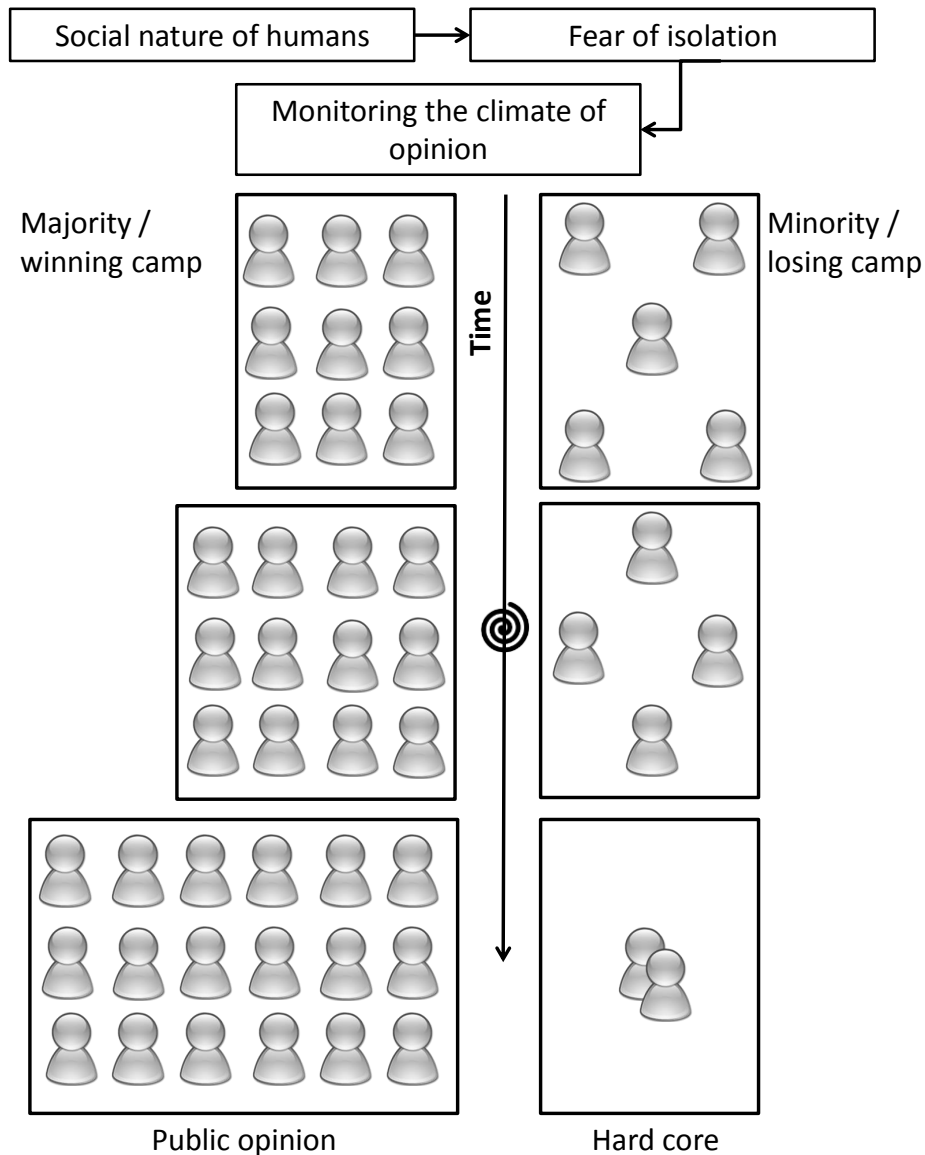
Source: Own work / Roessing, 2011, p. 15.

The range of the spiral of silence is limited by a set of preconditions. For example, the issue at stake must have a moral component; it must be able to emotionalize people. If an issue lacks this power to make people afraid of social isolation, a spiral of silence is impossible and its occurrence would be a contradiction to Noelle-Neumann's hypotheses.

Other conditions for processes of public opinion are societal conflict, opinion dynamics, and—at least nowadays—the involvement of the media (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004).

These preconditions influence the probability of a company being confronted with a spiral of silence in several ways. First, a corporation that deals with ethically controversial goods and services is more prone to run into trouble with public opinion. Selling nuclear energy, weapons, or genetically engineered food is more dangerous in terms of a spiral of silence than selling computer hardware or glass.

Second, if a societal conflict already exists, companies easily become involved. Selling tobacco products or manufacturing equipment for abortion clinics are appropriate examples here.

The consequences of the third precondition are a little more complex. Public opinion exists in two states: "solid" and "fluid" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 63). Solid public opinion includes the customs and conventions and the core values of a society. It is very difficult to operate a company against this type of public opinion. Public opinion becomes fluid when there are short-term conflicts to be resolved (e.g. during an election campaign) or when solid public opinion begins to change. These are the classic circumstances for spirals of silence to occur. For example, public opinion on nuclear energy in Germany turned around during the 1970s, causing a lot of trouble for the companies running the nuclear power plants, like RWE (Kepplinger, 1995).

The fourth precondition is the involvement of the mass media. There is evidence that spirals of silences occurred long before mass media came into existence. However, today mass media play a decisive role in starting and moderating processes of public opinion. As a rule, it is impossible to fight a spiral of silence against the mass media (more on this topic is discussed in the next section). Mass media also play an important role in scandalizing

organizations and individuals (Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012) and in reinforcing the effects of online communication.

Research Methodology

In order to identify and possibly to counter a spiral of silence, empirical data is needed. The methodology for spiral of silence research includes a sophisticated set of methods from survey research (Noelle-Neumann, 1985; 1989), content analysis, and in relatively few cases laboratory experiments. Due to the complexity of the theory, empirical research is challenging (Bodor, 2012). Development of methodology to test the spiral of silence theory has been continuing for decades. However, there are four sets of data, which are indispensable for a proper identification and analysis of a spiral of silence process (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004, p. 350-352).

First, information about the distribution of opinions among the population is necessary. How many people are aware of a given company or brand name? How many people have positive attitudes toward a firm, how many harbor concerns or objections toward a company? What is the image of a brand name? Using longitudinal data (more than two measurements over time) is a wise course of action since the spiral of silence is a process rather than a singular event.

Second, data about the climate of opinion is needed. The climate of opinion is the impression among a population what the predominant opinion on an issue (or a corporation or a prominent individual) is. Pollsters ask, for example, what the respondent thinks to be the majority opinion. Literature about the spiral of silence documents several questions that can be adapted for particular requirements. An especially interesting form of indicator question (indirect measurement) is the *boo test*. Public opinion researchers use it to identify the degree of emotional rejection of an issue (or company or product). Adapted for the issue of nuclear energy it reads:

"I would like to tell you about an incident which took place in a large public meeting on nuclear energy. There were two main speakers: One spoke in favor of nuclear energy and the other opposed it. One of the speakers was booed by the audience. Which one do you think was booed: The speaker supporting nuclear energy or the speaker opposing it?" (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, p. 262)

The third set of data necessary to delve into a spiral of silence is a measurement of silence. A spiral of silence exists if the losing camp is less willing to express their opinions in public than the winning camp. Usually pollsters present a hypothetical situation to the respondents and ask if they are willing to join the conversation about a given issue. In Germany the *train test* (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, p. 278) is very popular, which is set in a train compartment where a controversial issue is discussed. For countries where travelling by train is less popular, like in the U.S., survey researchers have developed alternative questions. Two very popular ones are presented here to illustrate what measurement of silence is about.

The *bus test* creates the image of a small public in the mind of the respondent. It reads:

"Assuming you are on a five-hour bus trip and the bus stops for a rest stop and everyone gets out for a long break. In one group of passengers, people start talking and someone says that he is completely in *favor of* [issue, e.g. genetic engineering of food] […]. Would you like to talk to this person or would you prefer not to?" (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 27).

The *reporter test* creates the image of a somewhat larger and more anonymous public. One of its many forms reads:

"Suppose a TV reporter with a camera and a microphone stopped you on the street to interview you for a story on the issue of [controversial issue] to be broadcast on the national evening news. Would you be willing to give him your opinion on the issue or not?" (Shamir, 1997, p. 612).

There are variations of this question mentioning a 'local TV station' or a 'newspaper with your name printed' in order to vary the size of the public the respondent thinks of.

The fourth set of data needed to analyze a spiral of silence is content analysis data on the position of the mass media. Noelle-Neumann wrote on this issue: "I have never found a

spiral of silence that goes against the tenor of the media, for the willingness to speak out depends in part upon sensing that there is support and legitimation from the media." (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, p. 276).

One of the mechanisms by which mass media influence public opinion is the use of exemplars, i.e. ordinary people whose opinions are cited in a newspaper article or a news broadcast. These exemplars have a considerably greater potential to alter people's perceptions of the climate of opinion than quantitative survey data (Daschmann, 2000): If three of four exemplars express one opinion (for example on a company selling genetically engineered products), many recipients believe that 75 percent of the general population share that opinion. Figure 2 illustrates the effect of exemplars in news coverage.

Figure 2: The effect of exemplars on the climate of opinion
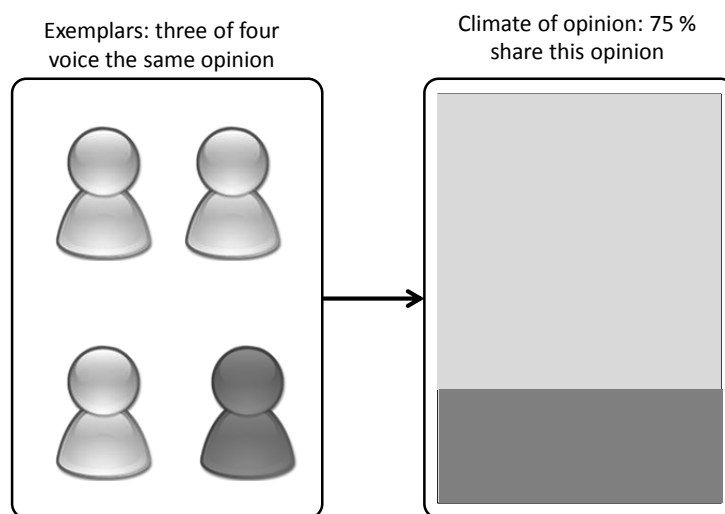
Source: Own work / Roessing, 2011, p. 52

Unfortunately, quantitative media analysis is very expensive, especially when longitudinal data is required to analyze a process in time. If a media analysis is performed, entertaining media should be included. It is highly probable that a single episode of *NCIS* dealing with private military contractors influences public opinion on this issue more than ten

articles in the NY Times. Unfortunately again, content analysis of fictional media content is very difficult, therefore very expensive and thus rarely done.

In addition to the data on (1) opinion distribution, (2) climate of opinion, (3) willingness to speak in public, and (4) the position of the mass media, it is advisable to include an empirical test of the emotional component of the issue at stake. This can be achieved for example by asking if the issue at hand is disputed enough to disunite friends.

Public opinion varies with location and time. What is acceptable in one culture can cause an outrage in a neighboring country. A striking example for this phenomenon is the difference in public opinion on nuclear energy in Germany and France. It is therefore necessary for companies with international activities to compare public opinion in different countries. Public opinion also changes over time. What was popular yesterday might be completely inappropriate tomorrow. Thus, the use of longitudinal data is advisable.

The spiral of silence in the digital age

Originally developed in a time when there were few TV programs and watching TV was a nightly family activity, Noelle-Neumann's theory needs to be adapted to the new media world with online media, IP television, and mobile communication devices (Schulz& Rössler, 2012). The Internet and its many applications are ever changing and pose a challenge for communication researchers. So far, researchers have identified some similarities and some differences between public opinion online and offline.

One important similarity is that the social nature of humans and fear of isolation seem to be as powerful in the anonymity of the online world as they are in the real world. Researchers assumed for some time that social control would not be effective in online communication due to the (potential) anonymity of the participants. In recent years, scientists have found evidence that refuted this assumption. Fear of isolation seems to be a strong factor

in discussion forums (Woong Yun & Park, 2011) and in discussions among Wikipedia's
authors (Roessing, 2013).

One important difference is the limited reach of public opinion online (limited as long
as the traditional mass media are not involved). In theory, the World Wide Web offers
maximum publicity—worldwide. In reality, very few people are involved in forum
discussions, Wikipedia disputes, or even online firestorms. Real world public opinion usually
concerns entire societies or at least larger communities (Roessing, 2013).

There is still much work to be done to clarify the relation between the spiral of silence
and the Internet. Theoretical assumptions have to be added or modified and much more
empirical data is needed. For example, there is some confusion about the relation between
online firestorms, the spiral of silence, and mass psychology.

Summary and discussion

While usually applied in the realm of political communication, knowledge about the
spiral of silence can be of great value to companies. Especially those companies that deal in
emotionally charged goods or services eventually will find themselves confronted with a
spiral of silence. In some parts of the world, inflicting damage to the environment is a
guarantee for negative press and negative public opinion. A prominent example is the public
outcry over Shell's plan to sink the defunct oilrig *Brent Spar* in the 1990s. Noelle-Neumann
and Petersen (2004) wrote about this case:

> "Social control, which ensures social cohesion, is effective only because of the
> social nature of man. One incident that comes to mind here is the controversy
> surrounding Shell Oil's Brent spar offshore oil platform in 1995, specifically the
> pressure of public opinion that arose in connection with the question of how best to
> dispose of the defunct platform, i.e. by sinking it into the sea or towing it ashore and
> dismantling it on land. Given the great value that the public places on environmental
> protection, this issue had a clear moral dimension." (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen,
> 2004, p. 345).

In Germany, there was a boycott against Shell's gas stations. Violent opponents of the company's plan to sink Brent Spar attacked some stations. The mass media and Greenpeace's PR strategy played an important role during the conflict (Kleinschmit, 2012).

Means to fight against a spiral of silence are limited. The most important measure is to be on good terms with the mass media. Companies with many satisfied customers should encourage them to defend the company in public—especially in times of crisis. However, companies dealing with nuclear power or genetically engineered seed will face difficult times during a process of hostile public opinion: Not very popular with journalists and without a significant number of satisfied customers, they are left to their own devices.

This paper is only a brief introduction in the spiral of silence theory. Many books and articles have been written about this theory and many issues are still to be researched. A joint effort of PR specialists, experts in corporate reputation, and communication researchers is advisable for the future. Their task would be to apply the spiral of silence theory to corporate reputation and corporate communication and conduct empirical research on all relevant factors.

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