

The spiral of silence:
is the theory tainted
by its author's pro-
nazi past



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Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann was born in a wealthy Berlin family in 1916.

She went on to study newspaper science and history at the University of Berlin and Munich. She received a scholarship from Goebbels (head of the Nazi ministry of propaganda) and did a sojourn at the University of Missouri and Asia. After returning to Berlin she worked for Das Reich as a journalist for a number of years and eventually founded the Allensbach Institute, a prestigious survey research center in Germany. Today, she is a renowned communications scholar and an ace pollster of Germany. Her theory the Spiral of Silence although well known as a scholarly research, has been subject to some controversy owing to her past Nazi associations and the influence of that association on the theory.

The theory - basis and implications The spiral of silence is a term used by Noelle-Neumann to describe the reaction of people to openly visible approval or disapproval among the shifting patterns of public opinions and values. According to her theory an individual's willingness to express his or her opinion is a function of how he perceives the public opinion. To run with the pack is a happy situation; but if one can not because their reasoning or convictions are contrary to what seems to be the universally prevailing point of view, they will just remain silent as the second best choice and in the process let the majority opinion dominate. The spiral of silence feeds upon itself - more the cautious people withdraw from the debate - the stronger the majority opinion appears - more the minorities withdraw. According to Noelle-Neumann it is through this resulting spiral of silence that a new public opinion develops or the meaning of an old public opinion gets transformed and spreads.

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The model of her theory is based on three major premises: * People have an innate fear of social isolation, which makes most people willing to heed the opinion of others. * Humans have an ability to realize when public opinions grow in strength or weaken - a "quasi-statistical organ" which makes people aware of the prevailing public opinion; * The reaction to this realization leads to either more confident speech or to silence - people are reticent to express minority views out of fear of being isolated. According to the spiral of silence theory, the threat of isolation is the primary driving force in the formation of public opinion. Individuals' opinions are more or less constant, but the willingness to express these opinion changes depending on their perceptions.

Noelle-Neumann cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings to support her belief and says that group pressure plays a role in conformity. In the words of Rousseau: "Public opinion is a compromise between social concerns and individual convictions. The individual must seek a middle-of-the-road solution, forced by the yoke of opinion and by his vulnerable nature, which makes him dependent on the judgment of others and averse to being singled out or to living in isolation" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 87). Noelle-Neumann explores the human dependency on others' judgment in support of her theory. In her research Noelle-Neumann includes a review of the classic literature on public opinion by Locke, Hume, Madison, and Alexis de Tocqueville; with the intent to establish validity of the idea that public opinion is rooted in man's social nature and his innate fear of isolation.

To substantiate her hypothesis, Noelle-Neumann also calls upon the "The Asch Length-of-Line Experiment," a laboratory experiment conducted by <https://assignbuster.com/the-spiral-of-silence-is-the-theory-tainted-by-its-authors-pro-nazi-past/>

Solomon Asch to show the inherent willingness of people to conform, based on the fear of isolation. The results showed what Alexis de Tocqueville described in his postulations of public opinion as "... dreading isolation more than error, they professed to share the sentiments of the majority" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p.

38). Further she also claims to support her theory with references to empirical data derived from a number of surveys as well as an experiment called the 'train test'. This test was meant to simulate a public environment instead of a laboratory. The train test supposes that a subject is faced with a five-hour train ride, and there is a man or woman sitting nearby who hold opposing viewpoints.

The conductor of the experiment questions the subject about their willingness to talk to the other person, the test is repeated with different subject matters, such as racial segregation, abortion, child-rearing, illegal drugs, or foreign workers (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 18). The likelihood of participation in a conversation with someone of the opposite viewpoint turned out to be very low according to the survey results. Further, Noelle-Neumann stretches the results of the train test to claim that an individual who holds the "socially accepted point of view" and senses a positive climate of opinion will be more likely to state his opinion publicly (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p. 6).

Role of Mass Media: Noelle-Newman believed that the media facilitates the muting of the minority opinion in the spiral of silence due to its ominous presence and clout. To support this hypothesis she refers to the works of

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Lippman who talks about the stereotypes of masses and difference between the perceptions that a person obtains firsthand and those that come by other means, especially through the mass media. She says the difference between the two types of perceptions is blocked out because the mass media is cumulative, ubiquitous and consonant. People are not conscious of it and tend to accept and adjust this indirect experience to their perceptions so completely that their direct and indirect experiences become inseparable. As a result the influence of mass media remains largely unconscious (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p.

145). The media gate-keepers decide the content and tone of the information that is dispersed to the public, filtering information as per their own interest. The media create a “pseudo crises” in order to sift the other topics out of the field. Noelle-Neumann states that individuals faced with the mass media are helpless; it is the journalist’s prerogative to confer the attention/recognition – good or bad. The helplessness of the people is manifested in instances when a person tries to gain public attention and is ignored by the media or when their selection process is used as a tool to exhibit an individual as a scapegoat (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, p.

155). Political Implications: The Spiral of Silence theory has immense implications on democracy as the most humane political system. Noelle-Neumann states that citizens keep close tabs on the climate of opinion in their countries, and remain quiet if they think their own views don’t comply with the majorities. She believes that to a large extent our view of social reality is distorted by the underlying ideology of the gatekeepers of the media content. According to her the producers of the media content are <https://assignbuster.com/the-spiral-of-silence-is-the-theory-tainted-by-its-authors-pro-nazi-past/>

liberalistic because liberalism is a code of function shared by the journalist community to portray themselves as critics, and as a facade to the government and the powerful. After all, she believes that most of the predominant function of the media is to give cues to the masses about the majority culture.

Noelle-Neumann claimed that this dependency on the media environment induces powerful effects on individuals as a result of endless reinforcement of messages and images (Noelle-Neumann, 1973). This is important in view of her discussion on "Vox populi - Vox dei" (Voice of people - Voice of god), wherein she states that every government rests on public opinion. Public opinion, in the sense of a social skin binding society together, has considerable political clout that can topple governments. Hence, as masses of stereotypes are gullible to the mass media manipulations, the elite should focus on developing consensus through "strong psychological pressures" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, pp. 174-178). These are extremely controversial views in the present day context and they have drawn a lot of flack from the mass media and other communications scholars.

With this background of the theory and its political and communication implication, let us move the discussion to the critique of the Spiral of Silence by Simpson and its counter criticisms by Kepplinger. Simpson's critique Christopher Simpson is a professor at the School of Communication at American University and he is the one of most important critiques of Noelle-Neumann's theory of the spiral of silence. He has authored several books about Holocaust and the Cold War, including *The splendid Blond Beast* (Grove Press, 1993), which talks about the economic incentives that lured <https://assignbuster.com/the-spiral-of-silence-is-the-theory-tainted-by-its-authors-pro-nazi-past/>

bystanders to participate in the genocide. Simpson's article " Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's " Spiral of Silence" and the historical context of communication theory", examines the interplay between Noelle-Neumann's social context and her published ideas.

Simpson evaluates the spiral of silence model of mass communication behavior on numerous grounds. The most important being, viz. , a) extent of influence that Noelle-Neumann's past as a Nazi apologist had on her theory; b) the inherent limitations of spiral of silence as the basis of public opinion formulation; c) its implications on the concept of democracy and people as incapable of thinking and making decisions on sophisticated political issues (Simpson, 1996). It is Simpson's belief that the attitudes and analytical tools Noelle-Neumann forged during her time as a Nazi journalist continued to shape her later thinking which is apparent in her theory. Some of the examples that he gives to substantiate his claim are (Simpson, 1996): * Her distrust of the cultural diversity, and of ethnically pluralist societies; * Her apparent contempt for aspects of democracy, and particularly for the role of public in political affairs Her tendency to scapegoat liberal mass media as manipulative and self-serving * Her exploitation of research design that produce politically useful results Simpson states that all these attitudes although they can be termed as extreme right wing views in the modern context, actually, draw their origins from the Nazi ideology. He goes on to reiterate that this should not be surprising as to come to power and stay there for a time, Hitler's Third Reich must have been supported by the intellectual's of that era.

Hitler's government could not have maintained its power and committed its singular crimes without voluntary popular support from its non-Nazi collaborators. Simpson mentions Noelle-Neumann's articles in *Das Reich* as frequently discussing methods to improve the German propaganda mechanics by monitoring public opinion. It is in these articles, he states, that Noelle-Neumann talks about the unwillingness of the general Americans to voice their pro-Germany views because of the powerful Jewish mass media and their anti-German propaganda in the country (1930-1940). Simpson regards this as a pointer towards her later arguments on mass media's all pervasive powers in the spiral of silence theory (Simpson, 1996, p.

157). Simpson, goes on to state that Hitler's publicity apparatus and intelligence agencies were not only interested in German and foreign public opinion, they also used sophisticated data collections tools for this purpose, some of which have been later employed by Noelle-Neumann in her "Train test" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, pp. 46-49) experiments, which has been denied by her. Simpson validates his allegation, with an archived directive from the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) the state security service in the Hitler regime mentioning the use of the method, which makes her claims as having no idea about the Nazi experiments on monitoring public opinion rather suspect (Simpson, 1997, p. 140).

One of Simpson's strongest arguments is that Noelle-Neumann contends in her book that the masses are ignorant, powerless and live with a bone deep fear of social isolation. She states that the classical democratic ideal that people can act with maturity and rationality like scientists in an effort to fathom reality with the support of the mass media is an illusion. And, a <https://assignbuster.com/the-spiral-of-silence-is-the-theory-tainted-by-its-authors-pro-nazi-past/>

genuinely participatory democracy, according to her, is a rationalist self deception that should be rejected (Simpson, 1996, p. 167). It is interesting that Noelle-Neumann (1994) criticizes the “ elite concept of public opinion” only to go on even more firmly to advocate the need of an elite leadership in a conforming society. Her approach states that the public’s opinion is not necessarily that of informed or elite audience, therefore, she contends the elite should focus on developing consensus in public opinion through “ strong psychological pressures.

.. in the public arena which is essential if the community is to be capable of making decisions and taking action”. Within her totalitarian definition of public opinion, Noelle-Neumann establishes a privileged role for powerful elite.

Along with which she offers advice on manipulation of the stereotypes by exploitation of music and clothing styles and control of the “ irrational, morally loaded component” in mass public opinion (Simpson, 1996, p. 165). Simpson dubs this contention of Noelle-Neumann as her own version of racially intolerant and culturally conservative “ Germanism” which perhaps still enjoys considerable support in the unified Germany and if suitably adjusted, in other nations as well. He goes on to reiterate that there are many other critiques of communication and mass communication that are founded on the logic that the ordinary people are capable of making sophisticated moral and political judgments. And, the attribute becomes even more important under the pressure to submit to amoral and criminal leaders (Simpson, 1996, p. 167).

Noelle-Neumann seems to be scared of the power of the masses that are capable of generating public opinion that can topple the powerful elite. Taken as a whole Noelle-Neumann's available writings prior to 1944 reveal that she actively participated in pro-Nazi student organizations and in Nazi propaganda efforts, including anti-Semitic campaigns used to intensify persecution of Jews in her country (Simpson, 1996, p. 159). After which her support for it seems to have dwindled, not unlike many others who changed sides once they saw Germany's fortunes of war gradually evaporating. Simpson backs up most of his objective criticism of Noelle-Neumann's work with evidence in form of archived news articles and directives of the propaganda ministry.

And, it would seem that the main issue for Simpson in criticizing Noelle-Neumann's theory of the spiral of silence is the question of deciding on an approach to communication and social organization that is best or (at least) the least harmful for the human society, which imbibes in it a huge diversity of ideas, interest groups and moral claims (Simpson, 1996, p. 167).