

# Contents cont'd

## Humanities cont'd

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Images: Is Integrating Images into  
Digital Writing Important?

**Kimberly Wagers**

96

## Social Sciences

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Expanding the Scope of the Spiral of Silence Theory to  
Increase Relevance the Digital Age

**Madalyn Drew**

104

Testing Educational Intervention as a Strategy for Addressing  
Workplace Incivility

**Madalyn Drew**

125

## Mathematics

---

Convolution Inequalities with Probability Distributions

**Richard McHone**

146

Hitting Times on Star-Shaped Graphs

**Donovan D Chang**

194

# **Expanding the Scope of the Spiral of Silence Theory to: Increase Relevance in the Digital Age**

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## **Abstract**

The Spiral of Silence theory is historically well-regarded in many academic fields and disciplines, however technological advances have complicated its application and relevance. There is some controversy in academia about the future of the theory; some argue it should be retired or replaced, whereas others seem to think it should be reexamined and retested in online environments. This paper presents the history of the Spiral of Silence theory and provides a brief overview of what other scholars consider to be its major strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, it explores modern research related to the application of the theory in the digital age and aims to explain major societal and technological changes to society that may have influenced the outcomes of this research. Following these sections, the argument is presented that the theory is still relevant in the digital age, however it is argued that the theory could be strengthened by adopting a comprehensive cultural studies approach that considers all of the nuances of the online and offline environments that effect the way public opinion is developed and disseminated

## **Keywords**

Spiral of Science Theory, Digital Age, public opinion, attitudes, moral communication, communication theory, media, mass media, conflict bias

## **Introduction**

The Spiral of Silence theory is one of the “five most influential contemporary media effects theories” (Campbell et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the rise of computer mediated communication (CMC), social networking sites (SNSs), and the changing landscape of mass media and news cycles have challenged the validity and modern application of the theory. As will be discussed below, results from several recent studies have found evidence that the principles of the theory do not hold up in the online environment. While some scholars have argued that this renders the theory irrelevant, one could argue that the theory and the associated research deserve a second life. The Spiral of Silence theory has many valid and applicable principles that could be considered relevant in the digital age if the conditions of the theory are expanded to account for societal and technological changes that have altered the way public opinion is developed and spread

## **History of Spiral of Silence Theory**

In the 1970s, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916-2010) developed the Spiral of Silence theory to explain the growth and spread of public opinion (Griffin, 2009). The theory considered the role of traditional media channels and the impact that the messages sent through these channels had on individuals’ willingness to share their views (Griffin, 2009). According to the research associated with the Spiral of Silence theory, people who believe that their opinions align with the majority of those around them are highly likely to express their views through both interpersonal and mass media channels (Griffin, 2009). On the other hand, people who feel that they hold a minority position are more likely to conceal their thoughts and beliefs (Griffin, 2009).

This condition eventually leads to a spiral effect where the “majority opinion” is expressed through both interpersonal and mass media channels while the perceived minority opinion is held back or silenced. The silence of the perceived minority group is often interpreted as acquiescence, or “passive acceptance or submission” which ultimately gives the perceived majority opinion more power (Merriam Webster, 2022). The theory’s research suggests that the reason people are not inclined

to share minority opinions is due to an inherent fear of social isolation, rejection, and condemnation (Griffin, 2009). As a result, people continuously scan their environment for clues about what society in general is thinking and feeling. They then use these clues to make inferences about the majority opinion and predict how that attitude will develop over time. According to Noelle-Neumann, humans do this through a proverbial “sixth-sense” or what she calls a “quasi-statistical organ” (Griffin, 2009).

In the context of the Spiral of Silence theory the terms ‘public opinion’ and ‘majority opinion’ are synonymous and can be defined as “attitudes one can express without running the danger of isolating oneself” (Griffin, 2009). Noelle-Neumann considered public opinion to be a “tangible force that keeps people in line” (Griffin, 2009). She further clarified that any issues considered under this framework must be controversial or contain inherent moral implications, otherwise people would not have a fear of isolation and, therefore, would not have reason to mask their opinion (Fox & Holt, 2018). These are important points for scholars to consider when they design their research studies.

Recognizing the limitations of her own theory, Noelle-Neumann described two types of individuals that are an exception to the Spiral of Silence theory: the hard-core nonconformists and the avant-garde (Griffin, 2009). The former are those people who have already been rejected for their beliefs and feel that they have nothing to lose by expressing a minority opinion (Griffin,

2009). They tend to cling to the “ideas of the past” as they have already been “overpowered and relegated to a completely defensive position in the public” (Griffin, 2009). Avant-gardes, on the other hand, are intellectuals, artists, activists, and reformers whose opinions lie in the isolated minority because they are too forward thinking (Griffin, 2009). As mentioned above, Noelle-Neumann does not include either of these groups in her theory but uses them as a boundary to explain when the theory applies and when it does not.

Noelle-Neumann argued that the media (television, print, radio, etc.) accelerates the spiral of silence as it tends to represent opinions disproportionately to their real strength in society (Griffin, 2009). She suspected that mass media was a significant contributor to pluralistic ignorance; a condition in which people have a false or mistaken perception of the public opinion (Griffin, 2009). As a result, Noelle-Neumann, who was both a political scientist and a professor, held a pessimistic view of the role of media in society and found it to be intrusive to the democratic decision-making process (Griffin, 2009).

Noelle-Neumann's theory can be broken down into four major players that influence the growth and spread of majority opinions. The first group includes those individuals who are empowered to express their opinions because their views are considered to be socially acceptable. The second group includes those who are silenced and discouraged from expressing their opinions because they are convinced that their views do not align with the majority of other people. The third group includes those who will express their views regardless of the consequences due to internal motivations, and the fourth group is the media. Although the digital age has changed the way these four groups interact, it has not added or eliminated any major players.

Given the extensive research pertaining to the Spiral of Silence theory and these four groups, it is worth reconstructing the theory to account for modern conditions, rather than simply retiring the theory. A good first step in this process is to examine the criticisms and modern applications of the theory. Once that is achieved, it will be possible to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the current standing of the theory before diving into a proposed plan to expand its relevance.

## **Criticisms of the Spiral of Silence Theory**

Although in its prime, the Spiral of Silence theory received praise for being “the most original, comprehensive, and useful” theory of public opinion, it still received criticism from other scholars (Griffin, 2009). These scholars had three specific concerns that were outlined in the book, A

First Look at Communication Theory. The first is that Noelle-Neumann based the spiral of silence on the assumption that fear of isolation is the reason that people choose to conceal their views (Griffin, 2009). Many scholars felt that her research did not provide sufficient evidence that people who remained silent felt more fear of isolation than those who spoke out about the topic (Griffin, 2009). Additionally, her theory did not seem to account for those people who remained silent for other reasons such as “shyness, disinterest, or a desire not to embarrass a person with an opposing viewpoint” (Griffin, 2009).

The second major criticism of the Spiral of Silence theory is that it heavily relies on the “train/plane test” to measure willingness to speak out (Griffin, 2009). This test was developed by the German Public Opinion Research Center to determine the likelihood that people would express their opinion when discussing a controversial topic (Griffin, 2009). This test asked participants to consider a hypothetical situation in which they are traveling for five hours next to someone who begins a conversation about a topic that is objectively controversial (Griffin, 2009). Apparently, by inquiring if the participant would be willing to engage in conversation in this situation, researchers were able to determine several factors that would determine the likelihood of people to voice their opinions (Griffin, 2009). Many scholars criticize the results of this test, however, claiming that the artificial nature of the hypothetical situation garnered results that did not reflect an individual’s actual willingness to speak out (Griffin, 2009).

The final criticism of the Spiral of Silence theory that was identified in the book, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, is that the theory focused on the national climate rather than the opinion of a specific reference group (Griffin, 2009). Critics of the theory argue that the majority opinion of family, friends, and other reference groups or “micro-climates” create more pressure for an individual than the judgement of “strangers in an anonymous public” (Griffin, 2009). This criticism makes sense considering the foundation of the theory rests on the idea that people carefully and continuously observe their immediate environments to understand the current climate and to make predictions about

the future public opinion. Modern approaches to the Spiral of Silence theory seem to address some of the major concerns and criticisms, but they have also created an entirely new set of considerations for scholars to consider.

## **Modern Approaches to the Spiral of Silence Theory**

The increasing prevalence of computer-mediated environments in the twenty-first century has complicated the application of the Spiral of Silence theory. While some scholars seem to believe that the Spiral of Silence theory is irrelevant in the age of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and social networking sites (SNSs) (Taimoor-ul-Hassan et al., 2019), others seem to think that the basic tenets of the theory still apply to online communication if perceived affordances are considered (Fox & Holt, 2018). Despite the lack of consensus in the social science community about the usefulness of the Spiral of Silence theory in the digital age, the research findings suggest that people's willingness to express perceived minority opinions in face-to-face (FTF) settings are different than their willingness to express them through CMC and on SNSs.

A literature review published in the *Academic Journal of Information Technology* in 2016, analyzed several studies that considered the relationship between CMC and the Spiral of Silence Theory (Panayırçı, 2016). While the authors found some inconsistencies between studies, the studies generally found strong support for a reverse spiral of silence phenomenon in CMC (Panayırçı, 2016). In these scenarios, people who hold a perceived minority opinion are more likely to speak out about controversial issues than those who hold a perceived majority opinion, which is the opposite of their tendencies in FTF environments. Another literature review published in the *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* in 2019, came to a similar conclusion and argued that, since mass communication is now a two-way process (versus the one-way flow of communication that occurs with traditional media), individuals are encouraged and empowered to express their opinion and ideas more openly and freely (Taimoor-ul-Hassan et al., 2019).

One major difference between these two reviews, however, is that the former concluded that the spiral of silence may occur in CMC, especially when it is longitudinally analyzed (Panayırçı, 2016), whereas the latter concluded that the Spiral of Silence theory is no longer valid (Taimoor-ul-Hassan et al., 2019). The scope of the second article, *Social Media Defy Spiral of Silence Theory and Provides Baseline for new Spiral of Social Media Theory*, was much more limited and did not fully consider the strengths and weaknesses of the studies it analyzed. Additionally, it did not accurately interpret the results of all the studies it cited. The other article, *Are Communication Theories Affected by New Communication Technologies?*, was much more thorough and accurate in its interpretation and analysis of research pertaining to CMC and the Spiral of Silence theory.

A more recent study, published by *Mass Communication and Society* in 2018, moved beyond comparing the Spiral of Silence framework in FTF settings and through CMC. Instead, the researchers studied how perceived affordances of a communication channel influence whether individuals express their opinions or self-censor (Fox & Holt, 2018). More specifically, the researchers studied the relevance of the Spiral of Silence theory on SNSs given the perceived affordances of network association, social presence, anonymity, and the persistence of expressed opinions in the online environment (Fox & Holt, 2018). The study concludes that many of the basic principles, or tenets, of the Spiral of Silence theory can be extended to the online environment; however, to fully understand this relationship, researchers should consider the influence of perceived affordances on a person's willingness to express their opinion in CMC and SNSs (Fox & Holt, 2018).

Another particularly compelling literature review, published by the *International Journal of Business Management and Commerce*, focused on research that examined the role of "public opinion in the cyberspace" (Yang, 2016). Like the other scholars, Yang identified that some research suggested that the spiral of silence exists in online environments, while other research negates its existence (2016). Yang pointed out that, like the original theory, modern applications of the theory suffer from

overgeneralization (2016). She also managed to identify several new challenges that scholars encounter when trying to apply the theory to the online environment. These obstacles include selective exposure and polarization, cross-cultural differences, anonymity of the virtual world and differences in the online and offline climates of opinion (Yang, 2016). Additionally, when comparing the Internet to traditional media, Yang recognized that the Internet may have a biased or unrepresentative population; those online communications are more interactive and user-oriented than traditional media; individuals' may have more weight in determining the majority opinion in cyberspace than in traditional media; and that the Internet maximizes individual's exposure to different cultures and minority group's opinions all of which create new issues and contexts for scholars to consider (Yang, 2016).

As many of the authors and researchers cited above pointed out, the findings from modern research pertaining to the Spiral of Silence are inconsistent. Despite this, the studies have addressed several criticisms of the original theory (thereby strengthening it) and provided several lessons that can be utilized to strengthen the results of future studies. For instance, the Internet allows researchers the unique opportunity to "survey, save, examine, and analyze actual discussions" (Panayırçı, 2016), and this point addresses the criticism that the original theory relied too heavily on hypothetical situations. It is possible that the inconsistent findings from contemporary work is due to an improvement in the measurement of actual willingness to express opinion (further research is needed to support this claim). In addition, the measurement and evaluation of perceived advantages of CMC and SNSs remedies the criticism that the original theory relied too heavily on the assumption that people concealed their opinions due to an inherent fear of isolation. Finally, the original theory was criticized for focusing on the national climate rather than the opinion of a specific reference group and for overgeneralizing individuals, both of which are issues that can be addressed by taking advantage of the affordances of the online environment.

The variety of situations that exist in the online environment could be an asset to researchers who want to understand how specific groups

and specific affordances influence a person's willingness to engage in either self-expression or self-censorship. If applied correctly, the results of these studies could be translated and retested in the offline environment which would strengthen the Spiral of Silence theory and help researchers gain a deeper understanding of how public opinion is developed and disseminated. It would also enable scholars to reassess the relevance and validity of the findings from previous studies that have already been conducted.

## **The Offline Culture of the Digital Age**

One major weakness of contemporary research that tests the Spiral of Silence theory in the online environment is that it fails to consider that society's offline environment has also changed significantly in the last fifty years. The symbiotic relationship between technological advancements and cultural development have significantly changed the way in which people relate, communicate, and interact both online and offline. In America, for example, societal trends reveal that the population is increasingly diverse, educated, and interconnected with the global community; however, the population is also increasingly divided economically, digitally, and politically.

As a stark contrast to the "mostly white baby boomer culture that defined the last half of the twentieth century," recently released statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate a significantly more diverse future for America (Frey, 2020). Over the last decade, the white population share declined in all 50 states, in 98.35% of the nation's metropolitan areas, and in 95.89% of its counties (Frey, 2020). More importantly, more than half of the nation's population under the age of sixteen identified as a racial or ethnic minority in 2019 (Frey, 2020). Over the last decade, America has seen an unprecedented decline in its white population (Frey, 2020). Despite this decline, the country's general population still experienced a growth of 19.5 million people, or 6.3%, because of increases in the population of race-ethnic minority groups (Frey, 2020). These trends are expected to continue well into the future and, in 2030, immigration is projected to become the primary driver of population growth ensuring an ethnic and racially diverse future for America (Vespa et al., 2020).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. population is also more educated than ever before (Schmidt, 2018). In 2017, for the first time, the percentage of the American population age twenty-five and older that completed high school or higher levels of education, also known as the educational attainment rate, reached ninety percent (Schmidt, 2018). For comparison, the educational attainment rate was just a little over fifty-five percent in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970). It is important to note that in addition to the general increase in educational attainment, all race and Hispanic origin groups also saw an increase in high school completion rates (Schmidt, 2018).

In addition to encountering more diversity on American soil, technological advancements in both modes of transportation and communication methods have increased the interconnectedness of the global community and provided increased opportunity for cross-cultural interactions. It is estimated that, in pre-pandemic times, more than a billion people traveled each year for pleasure (Alberts et al., 2019). Experts also estimate that nearly one percent of the world's total population (63.5 million people) is displaced or seeking refuge in other countries (Alberts et al., 2019).

Additionally, more than a million international students come to the United States to study each year (Alberts et al., 2019). These trends, in addition to new communication technologies, which have eliminated geographical barriers of interpersonal interactions, have increased the opportunity for intercultural encounters, even for people who have never left their home countries (Alberts et al., 2019).

Economically, the United States has seen a significant decline in the middle class for decades; an issue which has created a significant gap between the wealthy and the poor (Horowitz et al., 2021). Moreover, Black Americans and other minority groups in America have historically encountered systemic economic inequality and racial injustices in America which has denied them income equality and prevented them from attaining significant capital and realizing

generational wealth (Khanal et al., 2021). This racial wealth gap and the general economic inequality in America was accelerated by the conditions of the Coronavirus pandemic. One article published by the *Journal of Eco-*

*nomie Issues* pointed out that COVID-19 cases in the United States “seem to disproportionately affect Blacks, minorities, and the poor” and has “exacerbated some pre-COVID-19 economic and health disparities” (Khanal et al., 2021). These conditions have reignited several social justice movements and heightened the tensions between different racial and ethnic groups in the United States.

Digitally, America is experiencing division as a result of rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT). According to the authors of *E-inclusion or digital divide: an integrated model of digital inequality*, these technologies have “resulted in profound global political, economic, and social transformations” but these changes have not been inclusive or equitable (Yu et al., 2018). Early definitions of the digital divide focused on “access to devices or technology [as] the primary driver of the societal changes while human or social factors were seen as the secondary causes” (Yu et al., 2018). Modern definitions, however, consider that we already exist in a digital society where access to ICT is widespread and relatively standard. These definitions, therefore, were expanded to consider “the effective participation of individuals and communities in all dimensions of the knowledge-based society and economy through their access to ICT” (Yu et al., 2018). As the authors of this article pointed out, inequality and division will continue to exist as long as people are excluded from participating in the various political, social, and economic levels of the digital society (Yu et al., 2018). Politically, America is the most polarized it has ever been (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020).

Interestingly, one group of researchers found “a large, positive, and statistically significant” causal relationship between income inequality and political polarization (Voorheis et al., 2015). According to the authors of *Polarization in America: Two Possible Futures*, political polarization occurs when “subsets of a population adopt increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and party members (affective polarization), as well as ideologies and policies (ideological polarization)” (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). According to one study published by Pew Research, political polarization in the American public is being fueled by increasing ideological uniformity and partisan antipathy (2014). Additionally, they argued that polarization is affecting

politics, compromise, and everyday life (Pew Research Center, 2014).

While there are times when polarization can “produce more effective, stable democracies”, recent psychological findings suggest that the polarization in America is doing more harm than good (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). Polarization in the United States and the public trust in government have had a negative linear relationship. As polarization has increased over the past few decades, the public’s trust in government has seen a significant decline (Pew Research Center, 2021). Today, only about a quarter of Americans trust the government to the right thing “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (22%) (Pew Research Center, 2021). This is extremely low considering this number was fifty-four percent in 1970 and more than seventy percent up until 1964 (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Research has found that Americans tend to engage in cognitive conservatism when it comes to political issues. In general, Americans are refusing to interact with other people who are politically dissimilar; a trend which spans across workplaces, various communities, and the online environment (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020). Additionally, research suggests that Americans are unable to evaluate policies critically and objectively, they typically see core party issues as immune to debate, and they tend to suppress their opponents’ views and seek information that confirms their partisan preferences (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020).

The authors of *Polarization as a Function of Citizen Predispositions and Exposure to News on the Internet* pointed out that “when people consume an imperfect diet of information from news sources, the quality of their political knowledge can be threatened” (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). They also wrote that “political perceptions and behaviors can become skewed when people rely on information and opinion that represent only one slice of political reality” (Tewksbury & Riles, 2015). In an effort to test a framework for conceptualizing the potential influence of Internet news consumption on American opinion polarization, Tewksbury and Riles identified that “polarization appears to be a partial function of the interaction of evolving media systems and the characteristics of everyday citizens” (2015).

American society has experienced a lot of societal change in the past fifty years. Demographic information reveals that the population is increasingly diverse and educated which, in conjunction with the increase in interactions with the global community, means that there are wider variety of perspectives and influences in the formation of public opinion. America seems to be deeply divided economically, digitally, and politically. Additionally, trends reveal that Americans engage in cognitive conservatism which could make it hard for the population to reverse the effects of division and polarization without widespread systemic change. All of these trends, among others, have affected the way that people communicate, interact, and relate and, by extension, have changed the way that public opinion is formed, developed, and disseminated. They should, therefore, be considered by researchers who intend to understand how the Spiral of Silence theory appertains to the digital age.

## **Introducing a Cultural Studies Approach to the Modern Spiral of Silence Theory**

As Fox and Holt pointed out, it would be unreasonable to expect any singular researcher (or research team) to attempt to tackle entire scope of the Spiral of Silence theory in one study (2018). Similarly, it would be unreasonable for anyone to believe that that the entire scope of the societal and cultural landscape could be considered in a single study, academic paper, or theory. As the preceding sections pointed out, however, current research pertaining to the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in the digital age is filled with inconsistencies; some of which could be remedied by adopting a comprehensive cultural studies approach and developing a more extensive understanding of the complex cultural, social, economic, and political factors that cause people (both on the individual and group levels) to conceal their opinions.

According to *Media & Culture: Mass Communication in a Digital Age*, cultural studies research is an interdisciplinary field of study that focuses on the investigation of daily experiences and the complex relationships between social and cultural groups (Campbell et al., 2019). In particular, cultural studies “have attempted to recover lost or silenced voices” by

inspecting contemporary society for imbalances of power and status that may contribute to marginalization and oppression of certain groups (Campbell et al., 2019). These goals align perfectly with the interests of Noelle-Neumann who sought to understand why some people feel more empowered to share their opinion than others. This approach is also particularly relevant in the digital age given that America as a whole is dealing with unprecedented economic and digital division, political polarization, and sociodemographic changes that have shifted the way people form and share their opinions about public issues.

One foundational concept of cultural studies, introduced by media historian James Carey, is that communication and culture are closely related and intertwined (Campbell et al., 2019). In fact, Carey defined communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Campbell et al., 2019). Carey rejected the transmission, or linear, model of communication and argued that communication is more of a cultural ritual (Campbell et al., 2019). Other scholars, like Yang, have noted the importance of considering cultural beliefs, customs, and norms when testing communication practices and behaviors like willingness to speak out (Yang, 2016).

Although the relationship between culture and communication is too intricate to cover in this paper, there are some important culture-related definitions and concepts that, if applied to the theory, could help the global academic community reconceive and revive the Spiral of Silence theory. It is important to note that culture is extremely diverse, complex, and dynamic. Many people like to associate culture with nationality, but in fact each individual has their own culture that is based on numerous characteristics including “nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, and physical ability” (Alberts et al., 2019). For the following discussion, it is important to keep in mind that culture is considered to be “learned patterns of perception, values, and behaviors shared by a group of people” (Alberts et al., 2019).

According to the work of Young Yun Kim, culture exists at different levels, including the macroregional, regional/national, co-cultural,

organizational, and microcultural/family/individual levels (Baldwin et al., 2014). This point was also identified by critics of the Spiral of Silence theory who argued that the theory focused too heavily on the national climate (macroregional, regional, and national levels) rather than the opinions of specific reference groups in micro-climates (organizational, individual, family, and microcultural levels) (Baldwin et al., 2014). Prior to the digital age, an individual's immediate environment consisted of family, friends, and people that they interacted with FTF. As pointed out earlier, these reference groups created more pressure for the individual than the judgement of "strangers in an anonymous public" (Griffin, 2009). The integration of CMC and SNSs into modern society has blurred the lines between the different levels of cultural influence, however, as individual's micro-climates now consist of a variety of reference groups from all over the world.

Aside from studying the different reference groups that influence the culture of an individual, it is worth understanding how an individual's culture affects their behavior. The Iceberg Model of Culture suggests that the individual level of culture can be broken into two parts; one that is easily observable and one that is not. The former consists of an individual's behaviors and practices while the latter reflects the individual's perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Baldwin et al., 2014). The model further clarifies that behaviors and practices of the individual are specific to the situation while the deeper parts of their culture are the result of their environment, geographical location, demographic profile, economic status, religious beliefs, personal history, ideologies, education, media exposure, and other external and internal factors (Baldwin et al., 2014). Naturally, this makes deep-level culture like perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values less susceptible to change than surface-level cultural attributes like behaviors and practices. This concept supports the idea that an individual's silence about a topic does not necessarily mean that they have changed their opinion; it just means that they are modifying their behavior to fit the context of the situation.

One potential shortcoming of the Spiral of Silence theory is that it aimed to explain and predict the behaviors and practices of individuals without taking into account the deeper-level cultural complexities.

Many other scholars have noted this issue as well, criticizing the theory for being “overly general” and for failing to consider individual traits as a determinant of willingness to speak out (Griffin, 2009). Future research pertaining to the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in the digital age might benefit from a “bottoms-up approach” in which scholars first re-examine the external and internal factors of the digital age that determine a person’s opinion about public issues (as defined by Noelle-Neumann), and then try to determine the specific situations and conditions that influence whether the subject is willing to share that opinion. Under this framework, it would also be possible for scholars to rope the hardcore nonconformists and avant-gardes into the Spiral of Silence theory, using them as an interesting cultural use-case rather than simply dismissing them as outliers to the theories application.

An essential part of both the Spiral of Silence theory and cultural studies is the role of mass media and the public sphere which can be defined as a “space for critical public debate” (Campbell et al., 2019). Philosopher Jürgen Habermas argued that the public sphere, or a favorable communication situation, was necessary for a democratically functioning society (Campbell et al., 2019). A fundamental part of the public sphere is open, accessible mass media systems, but Habermas cautioned modern societies that mass media could be the enemy of democracy if abused by those in power (Campbell et al., 2019). More specifically, he warned modern societies to be aware of the “the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and ‘compliance’ with systematic imperatives” (Campbell et al., 2019).

Noelle-Neumann had similar concerns that mass media could interfere with the democratic decision-making process by skewing the perception of public opinion and, as a result, cause widespread pluralistic ignorance. Researchers in the digital age are quickly realizing that the increase in mass media, interpersonal communication, and news channels have simultaneously made the public sphere more accessible and contributed to widespread pluralistic ignorance, cognitive conservatism, polarization, and division.

Scholarship related to understanding political polarization in America has already identified examples of manipulative media deployment. More specifically, one group of scholars pointed out that “the increasing number of news channels, from cable networks to Internet sources, leads to competition between news channels to hook audiences” and, as a result, “news outlets [and] journalists tend to emphasize conflict, focus on disagreement rather than consensus, and even portray a divide as being wider than it actually is” (Kim & Zhou, 2020). Conflict bias, defined by Kim and Zhou as “heightened media attention to a conflict or a confrontation to the detriment of other topics” (2020), is just one example of mass media contributing to what Noelle-Neumann termed “pluralistic ignorance.”

It has hopefully been demonstrated that cultural studies and the Spiral of Silence theory are very similar in that they both consider the macro- and micro-level influences that interfere with the democratic decision-making process and that contribute to oppression, marginalization, and strategic silencing of large groups of people. The main difference is that a comprehensive cultural studies approach to the Spiral of Silence theory would encourage a bottoms-up framework where scholars first re-examine how the deployment and influence of mass media in the digital age differs from the traditional media formats that were popular in the 1970s; then they examine how other external social, economic, and political factors (like sociodemographic changes, economic inequality, political polarization, etc.) influence and shape deep culture (perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs) at both the micro and macro levels; before they finally consider the conditions and situations under which people of various cultural backgrounds and groups feel the need to alter or mask their surface culture (communication behaviors and practices). This approach, while similar to the original framework used for the Spiral of Silence theory, might give researchers, scholars, academics, leaders, and professionals new insights into how public opinion is formed, disseminated, and spread through the population

## **Conclusion**

Since its inception in the 1970s, the Spiral of Silence theory has provided a strong foundation for research in various fields including mass communication, political science, and media effects. Unfortunately, its relevance in the digital age is something that has been debated in the global academic community. In this paper it was argued that, if the conditions of the theory are expanded to account for societal and technological changes that have altered the way public opinion is developed and disseminated, the Spiral of Silence theory has many valid and applicable principles that could be considered relevant in the digital age. Moreover, it was pointed out that certain attributes of the online environment could even strengthen the Spiral of Silence theory as it addresses all of the major criticisms of the theory.

It was suggested that future research consider the various online and offline sociodemographic changes as well as the complex relationship between culture, communication, and the public sphere when testing the relevance of the theory in the digital age. In other words, it was proposed that future research on this topic adopt a comprehensive cultural studies approach when attempting to understand how public opinion is formed, shared, and spread. While this paper focused exclusively on the experiences and developments in America, it is meant to be a starting place for the global academic community to address some of the inconsistencies in modern research pertaining to the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in the digital age.

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