

The Spiral of Silence

A Theory of Public Opinion

by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

A leading German research institute has found evidence to support Tocqueville's view: "More frightened of isolation than of committing an error, they joined the masses even though they did not agree with them."

Returning to classical statements on the concept of public opinion, I have tried to substantiate empirically the process of public opinion formation through the individual's observation of his or her social environment.

Of all the pertinent statements by Tocqueville (8), Tönnies (9), Bryce (4), and Allport (1), I can mention here only Allport's example of a process of public opinion: the pressure brought to bear on householders in a neighborhood to shovel the snow from their sidewalks. This example illustrates that social conventions, customs, and norms are included, along with political questions, among the "situations" and "proposals of significance" with which a large number of people express agreement or disagreement in their public lives.

If public opinion arises from an interaction of individuals with their social environments, we should find at work the processes which Asch (2) and Milgram (6) have confirmed experimentally. To the individual, not isolating himself is more important than his own judgment. This appears to be a condition of life in human society; if it were otherwise, sufficient integration could not be achieved.

For our purpose let us assume that this fear of isolating oneself (not only fear of separation but also doubt about one's own capacity for judgment) is an integral part of all processes of public opinion. This is the point where the individual is vulnerable; this is where social groups can punish him for failing to toe the line. The concepts of public opinion, sanction, and punishment are closely linked with one another.

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But when does one isolate oneself? The individual tries to find this out by means of a "quasi-statistical organ" (7): by observing his social environment, by assessing the distribution of opinions for and against his ideas, but above all by evaluating the strength (commitment), the urgency, and the chances of success of certain proposals and viewpoints.

This is particularly important in changeable circumstances in which the individual is witness to a struggle between conflicting positions and has to consider where he stands. He may find himself on one of two sides. He may discover that he agrees with the prevailing (or winning) view, which boosts his self-confidence and enables him to express himself with an untroubled mind and without any danger of isolation, in conversation, by cutting those who hold different views. Or he may find that the views he holds are losing ground; the more this appears to be so, the more uncertain he will become of himself, and the less he will be inclined to express his opinion. Here we are talking not about the one-fifth whose views remained unshaken in the Asch experiment, but about four-fifths.

These different patterns of behavior are bound for their part to influence the quasi-statistical picture of the distribution of opinions which the individual gains from his social environment. The one opinion confronts him ever more frequently and confidently; the other is heard less and less. The more individuals perceive these tendencies and adapt their views accordingly, the more the one faction appears to dominate and the other to be on the downgrade. Thus the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one.

Based on this interaction concept of a "spiral" of silence, public opinion is the opinion which can be voiced in public without fear of sanctions and upon which action in public can be based.

Voicing the opposite opinion, or acting in public accordingly, incurs the danger of isolation. In other words, public opinion can be described as the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behavior in that it threatens the dissenting individual with isolation, the politician with loss of popular support. Thus the active role of starting a process of public opinion formation is reserved to the one who does not allow himself to be threatened with isolation.

Even among the classical writers on public opinion we find references to the fact that public opinion is a matter of speaking and of silence. Tönnies (9) writes: "Public opinion always claims to be authoritative. It demands consent or at least compels silence, or abstention from contradiction." And Bryce (4, p. 347) speaks of a majority which remains silent because it feels itself defeated: "In the fatalism of the multitude there is neither legal nor moral compulsion. There is merely a loss of resisting power, a diminished sense of personal responsibility and of the duty to battle for one's own opinion."

The process of public opinion formation resting on the “spiral of silence” is described by Tocqueville in “L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution.” He recounts how contempt of religion had become a widespread and dominant passion with the eighteenth-century French. An essential reason for this, he says, was the “falling silent” of the French Church: “People still clinging to the old faith were afraid of being the only ones who did so, and as they were more frightened of isolation than of committing an error they joined the masses even though they did not agree with them. In this way, the opinion of only part of the population seemed to be the opinion of all and everybody, and exactly for this reason seemed irresistible to those who were responsible for this deceptive appearance.” (8, p. 259)

Before testing this interactive model of the process of public opinion formation, I advanced five hypotheses:

1. Individuals form a picture of the distribution of opinion in their social environment and of the trend of opinion. They observe which views are gaining strength and which are declining. This is a prerequisite for the existence or development of public opinion as the interaction of individual views and the supposed view of the environment. The intensity of observation of the environment varies not only according to the degree of interest in a particular question, but also according to how far the individual expects to have to expose himself publicly on a particular subject.

2. Willingness to expose one’s views publicly varies according to the individual’s assessment of the frequency distribution and the trend of opinions in his social environment. It is greater if he believes his own view is, and will be, the dominating one or (though not dominating now) is becoming more widespread. There is less willingness if he feels that his own view is losing ground. The degree of willingness to express an opinion openly influences the individual’s assessment of the distribution of opinion in favor of opinions most often shown publicly.

3. From this one can further deduce that if the assessment of the current distribution of opinion and the actual distribution are clearly divergent, it is because the opinion whose strength is overestimated is displayed more in public.

4. There is a positive correlation between the present and the future assessment: if an opinion is considered to be the prevailing one, it is likely to be considered the future one also (and vice versa), but to varying degrees. The weaker the correlation, the more public opinion is going through a process of change.

5. If there is a divergence in the assessment of the present and future strengths of a particular view, it is the expectation of the future position which will determine the extent to which the individual is willing to expose himself. This ensues from the assumption that the cause of the differing degrees of willingness is the individual’s fear of isolation and of his self-confidence being shaken if his own view is not confirmed by the majority opinion or by the trend of opinion. If he is convinced that the trend of opinion is moving his way, the risk of isolation is of little significance.

In testing these hypotheses, I used multi-subject surveys carried out by the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, mostly in 1971 and 1972, and involving between 1,000 and 2,000 structured interviews with representative cross-sections of the population. Four types of questions were included in these surveys:

- (a) Questions about the respondent's opinion on a controversial subject (a person or organization, a pattern of behavior, a proposal);
- (b) Questions about the respondent's view of what the majority ("most people in the Federal Republic") think about a subject;
- (c) Questions concerning the trend for the future;
- (d) Questions concerning the respondent's willingness to expose himself in a public situation. For this purpose I asked the respondents to imagine a conversation among passengers on a long train journey and indicate whether or not, and how, they would enter such a conversation on a controversial issue.

So far, 12 themes or topics of a more or less controversial nature have been presented:

- Abortion law (April 1972)
- 0.8 per mill blood alcohol for auto drivers (April 1972)
- Capital punishment (June 1972)
- Unmarried couples living together (September 1972)
- Corporal punishment for children (November 1972)
- Foreign workers in the Federal Republic (May 1972)
- The "achievement-oriented society" (August 1972)
- The treaties of Moscow and Warsaw (May 1972)
- Recognition of the GDR (January 1971)
- Ban on the Communist Party (September 1972)
- More political influence for Franz Josef Strauss (October/November 1972)
- Wish to keep Willy Brandt as Chancellor (October 1972)

As can be seen in Table 1, the willingness to discuss a controversial subject in public varies with sex, age, occupation, income, and residence. Men, younger persons, and the middle and upper classes are generally the most likely to speak out, and these differences hold for all other findings. I shall, therefore, examine the survey results without further breakdowns into these demographic subgroups.

Table 2 compares two groups of persons, both of whom expect a certain development to take place. They think that the Federal Republic is moving towards socialism. The difference between the two groups is that the one welcomes this development while the other considers it a danger. The results show the differing degrees of willingness of the two groups to expose themselves. The "losing faction" is still numerically much larger than the "winning faction," but the tendency of the majority to remain silent is considerable and gives the impression of a "silent majority."

Table 1: Willingness to discuss among various groups in the population

	Willing to discuss controversial topic*	Unwilling to discuss	Undecided	N
	%	%	%	
Population, 16 years and over.....	36	51	13 = 100	9966
Men.....	45	45	10 = 100	4631
Women.....	29	56	15 = 100	5335
AGE GROUPS				
16-29 years.....	42	47	11 = 100	2584
30-44 years.....	39	50	11 = 100	2830
45-59 years.....	35	52	13 = 100	2268
60 years and over.....	27	56	17 = 100	2264
OCCUPATION				
Farmers.....	19	63	18 = 100	621
Unskilled workers.....	28	54	18 = 100	2289
Skilled workers.....	37	51	12 = 100	2430
Office workers, lower to middle-level civil servants.....	41	49	10 = 100	2628
Executives and higher-level civil servants.....	47	44	9 = 100	1051
Self-employed, the professions.....	40	49	11 = 100	927
MONTHLY NET INCOME OF MAIN MONEY EARNER IN HOUSEHOLD				
Under 800 DM.....	26	56	18 = 100	1448
800—under 1000 DM.....	32	53	15 = 100	1875
1000—under 1250 DM.....	35	52	13 = 100	2789
1250—under 2000 DM.....	42	48	10 = 100	2979
2000 DM and over.....	48	43	9 = 100	866
RURAL/URBAN				
Villages.....	32	52	16 = 100	1836
Small towns.....	37	52	11 = 100	3164
Medium-sized towns.....	36	51	13 = 100	1797
Large towns, cities.....	38	49	13 = 100	3160

* Respondents were asked about discussing the following topics with other travelers during a train journey: establishment of socialism; prohibition of the German Communist Party; Chancellor Brandt; whether unmarried people should live together.

We now have to examine whether the greater willingness for discussion among the group who see and welcome the advancement of socialism as progress is due to a more pronounced political interest. That question is answered in Table 3. The tendency to talk among the winning faction and the tendency to be silent among the losing faction is evident both among those who are politically interested and among those who are not.

If supporters of leftist views appear to have a greater willingness to expose themselves than do conservatives, it is because their expectations of future developments have been more consistently correct. Tables 4 and 5, for example, show the results of a survey on the subject of "recognition of the GDR (German Democratic Republic)." The survey was made in 1971—about two years before the signing of the treaty as the basis of relations be-

Table 2: Willingness to discuss socialism, August 1972

Willingness of persons who believe socialism will establish itself in the Federal Republic to expose themselves in a public situation and who see in such a development:

	progress (winning faction) N = 229		a danger (losing faction) N = 388
	%		%
Would like to discuss the possibility of socialism establishing itself with other train passengers.....	53	.....	28
Would not like a discussion.....	41	.....	61
Undecided.....	6	.....	11
	100		100

tween the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR. In 1971 there were roughly equal numbers for and against recognition and little difference between the two groups when they were asked whether they had the majority on their side. But there was quite a difference in their expectation of future trends. The supporters, who also believed that they were in the majority, clearly felt that time was on their side.

Two examples of this test series modify the silence hypothesis. On two topics the losing factions (minorities of between 17 and 25 percent as against majorities of 53 to 61 percent) were at least as willing as, if not more willing than, the majority to expose themselves. These were the minorities opposed to the treaties with Moscow and Warsaw and in favor of conservative politician Franz Josef Strauss. These findings suggest that, after a lengthy struggle, a minority faction may be reduced to a hard core of persons who are not prepared to conform, to change their opinions, or even to be silent in the

Table 3: Willingness to discuss and political interest, 1972

	Persons showing a political interest who expect socialism to establish itself and regard that as:		Persons with little or no interest in politics who expect socialism to establish itself and regard that as:	
	progress N = 282	a danger N = 444	progress N = 157	a danger N = 368
	%	%	%	%
Would like to discuss with other train passengers the possibility of socialism establishing itself.....	67	..... 43	34	..... 16
Would not like discussion.....	30	..... 49	57	..... 70
Undecided.....	3	..... 8	9	..... 14
	100	100	100	100

Table 4: Estimates of current majority on recognition of the GDR, January 1971

QUESTION: "Do you think most people in the Federal Republic are for, or against, recognizing the GDR?"

	Supporters of GDR recognition N = 847	Opponents of GDR recognition N = 884
	%	%
Most are for.....	49	8
Most are against.....	19	57
About fifty-fifty.....	22	19
Impossible to say.....	10	16
	100	100

face of public opinion. Some members of this group may get accustomed to isolation, and many of them may manage to support their opinions by selecting out persons and media which confirm their views.

To obtain unequivocal confirmation of Hypothesis 3, further studies would be necessary. For instance, the discrepancy between real and assumed distributions of opinion would have to be investigated. In addition, it would be necessary to know whether perceptions of opinions most often presented in public correlated with the respondent's own opinion or with his assessment of the dominant opinion in his environment. I hypothesize that, in the process of public opinion formation, observation of changes in the environment precedes changes in one's own opinion. My studies found a change of voting intentions during the 1972 election campaign in favor of the opinion presented more forcefully in public. The shift was strongest among women, who generally are less sure of themselves on political issues.

With observations on the time lag between a heightening of the expectation of a certain election victory and a change of the voter's intentions, I can turn to a discussion of the prognostic value of the silence hypothesis.

The usual demoscopic measurements of the distribution of opinion in the population concerning a certain topic must be supplemented by additional questions about the assessment of the opinions in the environment—which opinions dominate and which opinions are going to increase—and also by questions about the involvement and the respondent's willingness to defend a certain view in public.

With the help of this information, supporters of certain opinions can be analyzed for their self-assurance—their expectation of having the present or the future majority on their side, as well as for their willingness to defend their opinions in public. From the results of this analysis one could deduce whether a change of opinion is to be expected, which opinions are likely to grow or decline, and the extent of the pressure to conform. It would then be possible, for example, to make predictions such as these:

Table 5: Estimates of future majority on recognition of the GDR, January 1971

QUESTION: "How do you think it will be in the future, how will people view the situation in 12 months' time? Do you think more or fewer people than at present will be for recognizing the GDR as a second German state?"

	Supporters of GDR recognition N = 847	Opponents of GDR recognition N = 884
	%	%
More will be for recognition.....	70	23
More will be against.....	3	29
Impossible to say.....	27	48
	100	100

- A current majority considered to be a minority will decline in the future, whereas a current minority felt to be in the majority will grow.
- A current majority not for the most part united in their expectation of being able to maintain their majority will decrease. If, on the other hand, they are largely united in their favorable expectation of the future, they will take a long time to assert a contrary opinion.
- If uncertainty about the prevailing or expected future strength of an opinion increases, this signifies a reversal of the prevailing opinion.
- If two factions clearly differ from one another in their willingness to expose their views in public, the one showing more willingness is more likely to have the future on its side.

Combining such measures, one could conclude that a minority convinced of their future dominance and therefore willing to expose themselves, faced by a majority doubting whether their views will prevail in the future and therefore less willing to stand up for their views in public, will most probably become the dominant opinion, which cannot be contradicted without the risk of sanctions: it will change from a factional opinion to public opinion.

This kind of analysis can be applied to forecasts of political opinions, fashion trends, or the development of social conventions and customs—that is, to all spheres in which the attitude and behavior of the individual is governed by the link between his own convictions and the results of his observation of the social environment. In my opinion, this interaction is the principal feature of the process of public opinion formation. It follows from the important role of the observation of the environment that statements about public opinion are always specific to a certain place and a certain time.

It is commonly assumed that the mass media have an influence on public opinion, but the kind of relationship that exists is not at all clear.

Mass media are part of the system which the individual uses to gain information about the environment. For all questions outside his im-

mediate personal sphere he is almost totally dependent on mass media for the facts and for his evaluation of the climate of opinion. He will react as usual to the pressure of opinion as made public (i.e., published). Research will have to be increasingly concerned with questions about how the prevalence of opinion on specific topics or persons originates in the media system, and which factors promote or inhibit it. Is it based on the convictions of journalists? Is it based on certain principles of craftsmanship in the journalistic profession? Or do the proponents of the prevalent opinion occupy key positions in the media system which allow them to keep out even numerically strong groups of dissenters?

One cannot study the influence of the mass media on public opinion without a concept of the genesis of public opinion which can be operationalized. Such a concept is the spiral of silence, which points to the following questions: Which topics are presented by the mass media as public opinion (agenda-setting function), and which of these are presented as urgent? Which persons and arguments are accorded a special prestige, particularly the prestige of having the future on their side? How unanimous is the presentation of these topics, of their urgency, and of their chances for the future?

For a considerable time now a scientific discussion has been going on as to whether the media anticipate public opinion or reflect it—whether they are the mirror or the molder of public opinion. According to the social-psychological mechanism here called “the spiral of silence,” the mass media have to be seen as creating public opinion: they provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with alacrity, or with acquiescence, or with silence.

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