

Original Paper

Analysis of the Applicability of “the Spiral of Silence” in Weibo

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Abstract

“The spiral of silence” theory was first funded by Professor Elizabeth Noelle Neumann in 1972. This theory indicates that, if a person feels that his opinion is belonging to minority, he is less likely to express it, because he is afraid of being retaliated or isolated by majority. This theory assumes that people are always estimating what the public opinion is, and they often judge it through the media. The theory also assumes that we have an inherent fear of isolation and that we know what perspectives can lead us to isolation by majority. This theory also explains why there are always such minority groups in the society and they dare to raise different opinions. With the flash development of the Internet, more and more self media have broken the old pattern of mass media as the information publisher. So it is a big question whether “the spiral of silence” theory is still applicable to the Internet environment. This paper, from the perspective of the basic hypothesis and core theory of “the spiral of silence”, focuses on whether the theory is applicable to the communicative behavior in We-Media.

Keywords

the spiral of silence, Weibo, group pressure, self media

As one of mass communication theories, the theory of “the spiral of silence” mainly focuses on the traditional mass communication environment. However, with the rise of the internet and the increasingly significant trend of media convergence, scholars raised diverse ideas. Some of them think the theory can not work in the new media environment, but others think in reverse. So whether the theory of “the spiral of silence” is fully applicable to self media has become a significant issue. This paper attempts to analyze and explore whether the theory of the “spiral of silence” is applicable to the communication activities in Weibo, starting with the question: if the premise hypothesis of “the spiral of silence” theory is changed in the new media environment, and what are the specific forms of these changes.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

When first learning about “the spiral of silence”, I was told that this theory was applicable in the traditional mass communication environment. I wondered if this theory is still working in the new media era. When I use Weibo, a very similar social network in China as Facebook, I find a lot of details are much similar to the characteristics of “the spiral of silence” theory. So I decide to study this theory’s applicability in Weibo platform. I will give a brief introduction to the theory, including its origin, the social background and the contents of the theory. Then I implement a comparison in both traditional mass communication environment and Weibo environment, and try to find out what have been changed and what have not. Finally, the conclusion is drawn. Although there are still some characteristics of the “spiral of silence” theory in Weibo communication activities, its premise and application conditions have changed due to the different environment. Therefore, the theory of “the spiral of silence” is not suitable for Weibo platform.

The problem involved in this article is the application of the “spiral of silence” theory in the new media environment. On this issue, the current mainstream opinion in the academic world is that the theory is still generally applicable to the new media environment of the Internet. During the research, the following papers or academic reports were mainly referenced.

Ma Xueqing mentioned in the article “The Spiral of Silence in the differences between the traditional mass communication environment and the network communication environment” that the theory ignores “hard-cores”, which makes it unable to explain why abnormal thoughts spread rapidly.

In his article “Whether the Spiral of Silence Will Disappear on the Internet”, Liu Hailong believes that due to information has an increasingly greater impact on people’s production and life, the Internet, as one of the communication channels has gradually become an integral part of our lives. The “spiral of silence” theory “does not exist in cyberspace in isolation, but has complicated interactions with public opinion mechanisms in our real life”.

Zhu Haiqing concluded in his article “The Spiral of Silence in Weibo Spread”: “The anonymity and decentralization of Weibo has reduced the pressure on individuals directly, and the role of opinion leaders has been relatively dispersed. However, it can be seen that new media platforms such as Weibo have not diminished the role of the “spiral of silence”. The so-called “free exchange of opinions” may still be a game for a handful of people, and it still needs a great and long term effort to create a “free market for opinions”.

2. A Theoretical Overview of Theory of “The Spiral of Silence”

2.1 The Proposal of the Theory

In 1947, Professor Elizabeth Noelle Neumann founded the first public opinion evaluation institution in West Germany after the World War II, and began to use the public opinion research methods which she learned in the United States to study the behavior of the West German people in voting. As a result, she found that many things that happened during the general election could not be explained by the theory

she learned in America. So she decided to hunt a new research method. In 1972, when she attended the first Tokyo International Conference on Psychology, she put forward the theory of the “spiral of silence”. In that year, she used her own theory to study the West German election, and the results showed that her assumptions were consistent with the real situation of this election. In 1990, Neumann published “the theory of public opinion: the concept of the spiral of silence” to supplement the concept of the spiral of silence. She assured that the fear of loneliness, the observation of public opinion and the estimation of different political forces determine whether people express their own opinions or reserve their opinions.

2.2 The Social Background of the Theory

When the theory of “the spiral of silence” was put forward, the social communication environment was still in a traditional mass communication. At that time, the Internet had not been invented, and the most common ways of communication were newspapers, radios, televisions, etc. Under such a media environment, the theory of “the spiral of silence” was largely inspired by the theory of “gatekeepers”, for it advocates that due to the gatekeepers in the media, those inferior opinions and non-mainstream ideas cannot be published. Besides in the interpersonal communication, people are confined to the communication scope because of the limitation of communication methods at that time. Therefore, people in reality can only be in a specific communication group under certain group pressure and for limitation from specific group norms. The people who receive the information from mass media are the terminals of information receiving process, rather than the interactive nodes of mass communication. The audience of mass media can of course be reluctant to get the recognition of the information they believe, for they lack flexible feedback channel.

2.3 The Key Meaning and Presupposition of “the Spiral of Silence”

After a series of public opinion surveys and analysis on the change of German election support rate, Professor Neumann found that human beings are against being isolated, which is similar to other animals. On the basis of the research results, she put forward three propositions about “the spiral of silence”:

- (1) The expression of personal opinions is adequately embodying a process of social psychology.
- (2) The expression of opinions and the diffusion of “Silence” are showing a spiral process of social communication. According to Professor Neumann, Party A’s opinion which is dominant or increasingly supported will become more and more dominant, while Party B’s opinion will gradually lose its support.
- (3) Mass communication influences, restricts and utilizes public opinion by creating “opinion environment”. According to Professor Neumann, the formation of public opinion is not the result of public “rational discussion”, but the irrational convergence process of public opinion environment.

Then, on the basis of the hypothesis of “the spiral of silence”, Professor Neumann developed a desirable concept of mass communication, which mainly covers the following three aspects:

Public opinions are consisted of the following three elements: interpersonal communication, mass communication and people’s cognitive psychology of “opinion environment”.

Opinions emphasized by mass media are easy to be recognized as “majority” or “advantage” information by the audience;

“Pressure” and “safety” are deriving from the understanding of the environment, which will cause the expansion of “Silence” and “dominant voice” in interpersonal communication, and lead to the overwhelming public opinion state: that is “majority opinion” in social life—the birth of public opinion. Neumann mentioned three key concepts in her “the spiral of silence” theory: The first one is “fear of isolation”, which is considered as one of the most powerful forces of human social behavior; the second is “opinion climate”, which refers to the distribution of opinions in an individual’s environment, including the current distribution of opinions and the possible distribution of opinions in the future; the third is “Quasi sensory statistics” referring to the ability of individuals to perceive opinions, and estimate whether their behavior will be accepted or opposed by the majority of opinions in their environment. Accordingly these three concepts constitute the five basic hypotheses of the theory:

Society makes individuals who deviate from society feel lonely;

Individuals are often in great threat for solitude;

Fear of loneliness makes individuals constantly estimate the opinions of social acceptance;

The results of estimation affect the behavior of individuals in public, especially when expressing their opinions, they will speculate whether publicly or secretly;

(4) People use mass media to evaluate the opinions of the majority.

2.4 The Applicable Conditions of “the Spiral of Silence”

The original applicable environment of “the spiral of silence” is concerned with the traditional mass communication environment, so its applicable conditions should be:

The communication modes are mass communication, organizational communication and interpersonal communication.

The communication relationship between the information publisher and the audience is one-way relationship, so this relationship is lack of feedback channels and interaction tunnels between both sides.

Individuals are necessarily conscious that they are under group pressure.

Individuals are prone to worry about the loneliness.

Individuals can feel “opinion climate” through “quasi sensory statistics”.

3. “The Spiral of Silence” and Weibo

3.1 Social Background of Weibo Era

With the rapid development of Internet technology, new social media has greatly impacted the method of mass communication. Information disseminate in a much more convenience, timeliness, interaction and individuation way. This new way greatly changes the original one-way dissemination of information. The individual is no longer the end of information dissemination process, but the much more interactive node of information communication. This kind of interactive information has gradually penetrated into everyone’s daily life.

Weibo is a diversified information platform based on users’ relationship. This platform includes information production, processing, sharing, dissemination and acquisition. This platform has a very

low-level threshold, and every blogger (individual) can speak freely by it. So inferior opinions and non-mainstream ideas can also be freely expressed. The Weibo platform not only gives primacy to every blogger the right to integrate into the whole process of information dissemination, but also limits the traditional mass medias' exclusive right of discourse power.

3.2 Characteristics of Weibo Platform.

3.2.1 Hierarchical Pattern in Weibo Communication Activities

As the existence of Weibo, it has simulated the real authority structure: the distinction between Weibo "V" (means VIP) and ordinary account is to distinguish all the Weibo users according to the pattern of elite groups and ordinary groups in our actual life

Weibo "Vs" are often the elites and experts in a certain field in the daily life. They have much higher authorities and discourse powers than the ordinary users. Weibo gives these people special titles, which makes them gain the same privilege of discourse power, and play the role of guiding public opinion. These Weibo accounts are equivalent to the information superiors, opinion leaders and mass medias (generally certified as Weibo "Vs" in the platform) in traditional mass communication. In contrast, the ordinary accounts belong to common people. These Weibo bloggers usually offer their favorite, support articles and opinions or share their life and experiences. But they rarely express their own views and opinions.

The managers of Weibo are ranking with the top ones in this power structure. They have the rights to seal the account and delete the blog, which similarly implement the same power as the government departments that instruct and manipulate the public opinion in the real society.

3.2.2 Existence of Opinion Leaders in Weibo Communication Activities

Take Sina Weibo as an example, stars, experts and even well-known grassroots bloggers all have a large number of fans, and their original blogs, forwarding, comments and other behaviors have attracted so much attention. As much more important communication nodes in Weibo communication activities, their words on Weibo can make the events which they are concerned about be forwarded in a large amount, spread widely, and finally form the public opinion. In this sense, these well-known Weibo bloggers can be regarded as opinion leaders in traditional mass communication activities.

3.2.3 Existence of Group Pressure in Micro-Blog Communication Activities

"Group pressure" is an important condition of "the spiral of silence". We can find this kind of "group pressure" from the tags and the attached functions of Weibo. These additional functions are similar to a label that identifies the nature of a group, and the label owned by the members in the group is actually an implicit norm. In micro-groups, there are various or potential or explicit rules of behavior and language norms, etc. If the members of the group do not want to be isolated and marginalized by other members, they can only try to adapt to this specification. If most members of the micro-group support the same opinion, the dissenters will suffer from fierce pressure, which is in accordance with the pressure shared from the actual group. In addition, most users will pay attention to their real friends and relatives. Because they have the same interests and opinions, they will become BBF online and eventually develop

into offline friends. According to the online questionnaire, 80% of Weibo bloggers said that they used to dare to express their opinions. But when they either paid attention to many friends and relatives who are familiar with them or developed online users into offline friends, they become afraid to express their real thoughts. Accordingly, although the Internet has virtual components, it also has a realistic part. More importantly, the existence of IP address makes it easy for Internet administrators to find out those who violate laws and regulations in the network society. Therefore, anonymity is not completely “anonymous”. Therefore, in the Weibo platform, group pressure still exists.

3.3 Change of the Presupposition of the Theory on Weibo Platform

3.3.1 Anonymity of Weibo and Weakening of Individual's Fear of Loneliness

According to Neumann, the important premise of “the spiral of silence” theory is the fear of social isolation, then the “fear” would lead to the behavior of convergence and conformity to “dominant opinions”. Sproull and Kiesler put forward the hypothesis of “missing social situation” in 1986. They pointed up that, individuals are full of various situational cues of social contexts in the interaction of Face-To-Face communication (FTF), including personal position, expression, body language, the location of communication, etc. But because of the anonymity on the Internet, Internet-based communication activities are impossible to carry these clues. Once these situational cues of social contexts are removed, there will be less control and regulation in the society.

With the influence of this factor, citizens online will have less fear of social isolation. As Weibo users, they will speak freely in the process of expressing their opinions on Weibo. In addition, those who have niche hobbies may hard to find friends in real life, but they can find people who share common interests easily online. This fact is also conducive to weakening the individual's fear of loneliness.

3.3.2 Weakening of “Fear of Loneliness” Affect the “Quasi Sensory Statistics” of Individuals

One of the three key concepts of Neumann's “spiral of silence” theory is “quasi sensory statistics”. The weakened fear of loneliness will gradually reduce the motivation of individuals to force themselves to estimate what the mainstream opinion of society is. Without the results of “quasi-sensory statistics”, it will affect the individual's choice of whether to hide their views. When most individuals decide to publish their opinions publicly, it is possible that there will be hundreds of contentions in the Weibo “Opinion Square”.

3.3.3 Weakening of “Opinion Climate” Orientation of Mass Media

Neumann believes that in the era of mass communication, the orientation of the mass media on opinion climate will directly affect the audience's willingness to express their opinions. If people can't get support from others, they will be aligned with the opinions of the mass media. The virtual nature and anonymity of the Weibo platform have largely released the right to speak to the public. This diversified phenomenon of “Opinion Climate” has directly weakened the guidance of the mass media towards “Opinion Climate”.

3.3.4 Limitation of the “Spiral Process of Social Communication”

Professor Neumann believes that the expression of opinions and the spread of “silence” is a spiral kind of social communication process. Party A’s opinions that dominate or are increasingly supported will become more dominant, while Party B’s opinions will gradually lose support. But on the Weibo platform, this spiral communication process is not completely applicable to all situations. For example, what a star did or said something caused a fierce discussion on the Weibo platform. It is difficult for the party who “dislike” the star and the party “like” the star to enter the “spiral” spreading process.

3.4 Change of Applicable Conditions of the Theory

The “spiral of silence” theory was originally applied to the traditional mass communication environment. But the media environment of Weibo platform is considered as the new media environment of the network, so the applicable conditions of the theory have changed to some extent.

The model of communication of Weibo communication activities is no longer mass communication, organizational communication or interpersonal communication;

On the Weibo platform, the information publisher and the audience have become a two-way communication relationship, which has increased feedback channels and a lot of interaction;

Individuals can still feel the group pressure on the Weibo platform, but the pressure on the individual from the group is much lower than before;

Anonymity on Weibo platform have weakened the users’ fear of loneliness;

On the Weibo platform, individuals can feel the “Opinion Climate” through “quasi-sensory statistics”, but their willingness to feel the “Opinion Climate” is weakened.

4. Conclusion

Although there are still some characteristics of the “spiral of silence” theory in Weibo communication activities, its premise and application conditions have changed due to the different environment. Therefore, the theory of “the spiral of silence” is not suitable for Weibo platform. We need to put forward newer and more modern theories on public opinion guidance and communication to adapt to the new media era.

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Note

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