

**How Internet Communications are affecting (and being affected by)
the *Spiral of Silence*:
Possible Implications for Grassroots Campaigns – A Pilot Study**

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Abstract

This study explores the creation and growth of various online groups and communities and how they help eliminate the feeling of isolation among individuals with minority view. The focus of this study was to test the spiral of silence theory in a two-way, electronic, group-communication type of setting. The study also explored how the growth of online communities, and the subsequent ineffectiveness of the spiral of silence theory, can be used by individuals and groups with the minority or different views to start grassroots campaigns and garner support for their various causes. This study also gained insight into the problems of measuring spiral of silence. For this purpose, we studied one thread of posts on two Protest Blog Websites' over a period of four months and found that as responses to the post increased, so did the number of search results over the period of four months.

Keywords: *Spiral of silence, online community, activism, computer-mediated-communication, communication technologies, grassroots campaigning, crowdsourcing*

Introduction

Previous research conducted on Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory has focused on how the theory manifests itself in various real-life situations, primarily in large and small group settings. Little research however, has explored what, if anything, changes when the spiral of silence theory is tested in an online environment. One of the most significant role media played in the last century was to aid in the creation of various segments of the market and subsequently, to serve those various segmented markets. This new century however, has seen various media evolve to recognize, appreciate, innovate, and transform and serve groups that have become super-segmented niche markets giving rise to the phrase, "a media for one". For example, in the 80s, there was one MTV which played various genres of music whereas now, every genre has at-least one television channel dedicated to it, HBO has grown to include 11 separate channels from a single channel, and XM Satellite Radio offers customers a choice of 150 radio stations which are targeted specifically at these super segments (the segmentation of one comedy channel into three; adult comedy, kids comedy, and family comedy).

The main media vehicles leading this phenomenon of super-segmentation are television, magazines and the internet. The average number of television channels received by the US household has grown from 18.8 in 1985 to more than 102 in 2003 (Nielsen Media Research). Magazines serve a super-segmented market too. According to the Magazine Publishers of America, "for virtually every human interest, there is a magazine". There were 17,321 magazines produced in 2002, up from 14,870 in 1992 (MPA Annual Handbook). However, the Internet

has been the most significant advancement in media and media technologies of all time. It is the fastest growing media of all time, growing rapidly from a mere 16 million users worldwide in 1995, to more than 888 million users as of March 2005 (Internet World Stats). One of the most novel features provided by the Internet is the relative anonymity afforded to users in addition to providing group venues in which individuals can meet others with similar interests and values (Barga & McKenna, 2004).

This paper explores the creation and growth of various interest groups (Specifically online groups and communities) and how these online communities help eliminate the feeling of isolation among individuals and hence affect the Spiral of Silence theory. As we wanted to study the effects of two-way communication on the feelings of isolation, television and magazines were excluded from this study as they are primarily one-way communication media forms. The study finally explored how the creation of online communities, and the subsequent decline of the spiral of silence, can be used by individuals and groups with “minority” and/or “different” views to start grassroots campaigns to spread their agenda, and to garner support for their various causes- online and offline.

Review of Literature

The Internet and the Growth of Online Communities

The Internet is the latest in a series of technological breakthroughs in interpersonal communication - following the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television (Barga & McKenna, 2004; Morris & Ogan, 1996). The Internet is

extremely unique in its structure because it is interactive like the telegraph and telephone (but not like the radio and television), and it is a mass medium like radio and television (but unlike the telegraph and the telephone) (Barga & McKenna, 2004). This mixing in of the best of all known media is to a great extent responsible for its mega-success. In the coming years, this popularity is poised to grow a lot more, both in numbers and intensity, as children now are growing up with the Internet being an integral part of their lives and they will take it for granted as people do now with radio and television (Turow & Kavanaugh, 2003). In other words, it has managed to become a natural backdrop of our everyday lives.

One of the most popular reasons why people use the Internet is to communicate with each other via e-mail, to maintain (and sometimes create) interpersonal relationships (Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Stafford et al, 1990; Boase, et al. 2006). The popular view gaining ground is that “the Internet affords a new and different avenue of social interaction that enables groups and relationships to form that otherwise would not be able to, thereby increasing and enhancing social connectivity” (Barga & McKenna, 2004). Because of the high level of anonymity the Internet offers, it has great impact on the structure of participation and relationships that happen online specifically when participating in online group venues like chat rooms, message boards, etc. (Barga & McKenna, 2004). On the other hand, some studies have found that low self-esteem users prefer to communicate online more than high self-esteem individuals (Joinson, 2004).

The Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) literature has explored the important role new media technologies have played in creating interaction, online communities, and a sense of identity for various groups (Barnes 2001). Internet technology may be extremely important in addressing social change among American families (Surratt, 2001). The use of online media is now referred to as cyberculture—focusing mainly on individual identities and communities (Bell, 2001; Hilt & Lipschultz, 2004). CMC is also different from other channels of communications because it limits the “bandwidth” of social communication, compared to face-to-face or telephone communication settings as they occur in real time and are heavily influenced by factors such as tone, gestures, etc. (Sproull & Kiesler, 1985). Also, significantly higher levels of self-disclosures have been found in CMC compared to face-to-face communications (Joinson, 2004). However there is a theoretical barrier to studying the internet from a communications perspective and hence the internet has not been prominently featured in traditional mass media research (Morris & Ogan, 1996).

Internet, Online Communities, and Relationships

According the Pew research Center’s “2006 Pew Internet & American Life Project”, the internet and email actually help increase social capital and people are able to maintain better relationships with more people due to the internet and the communication tools it offers (Boase, et al. 2006). Parks and Floyd (1995) conducted an experiment on relationship formation and people participating in Internet communities. They concluded that relationships developed online resemble “real-world” relationships very closely in terms of breadth, depth and quality. Another study found that almost 50% of online relationships culminate

into some form of “Real-life” relationships, and almost 22% of the participants reported either marrying, getting engaged to, or were living with someone they had met online (McKenna et al. 2002). This study also found that people who met each other for the first time over the Internet liked each other significantly more than people who had met each other for the first time face-to-face, even when – unknown to the participants – they were meeting the same person. The prime reason for this was that people could express themselves in the privacy of the internet than in public (McKenna et al. 2002).

Besides providing access to a plethora of information on varied topics, and becoming a newfound base for one’s social life, the Internet offers a wide variety of special interest newsgroups. There are thousands of newsgroups devoted to everything from Indian cooking to dinosaurs to raincoat fetishes (McKenna et al. 2002). Another form of unique services offered by the internet is the e-mail “listservs” in which group members can post messages to all other members, and other Websites specializing in about every topic one can imagine. These virtual groups are like breeding grounds for the formation of friendships and even close relationships because of the shared interests and values of the members’ (McKenna et al. 2002) perceptions of similarity and shared beliefs in addition to shared strong topical interests. These virtual groups can become the epicenter of ones social life and overall identity Bargh and McKenna, 2004).

McKenna and colleagues (1998) reasoned that people with stigmatized identities such as homosexuality or fringe political beliefs are self-motivated to join and participate in Internet groups devoted to that identity, more so because of the relative anonymity offered and thus, acquiring the safety offered by

internet medium as opposed to a face-to-face participation and scarcity of such groups in real life. Due to the limited availability of such venues, internet groups could be the only available source to discuss aspects of their identity for such people, as a result of memberships into these groups should be of prime importance to these people and also the norms of such groups should exert a stronger than usual influence over member behaviors.

Belonging to a minority or ethnic social group constitutes a stigma in many social situations (Crocker and Major, 1989). One can easily conceal issues such as race, gender, or age-related features over the internet as compared to traditional venues (Brewer, 1988). Kang (2000) in his study argues that one potential social benefit of the internet is to disrupt the reflexive operation of racial stereotypes, as racial anonymity is much easier to maintain on-line than off-line. In other words, a lot of research points to the fact that individuals are more expressive online, and are more likely to find other individuals who share their common interests, and form some type of relationship with them – the involvement of individuals in the virtual world, where a sense of anonymity affords them to be more open and carefree in addition to the sheer number of people online (expected to exceed one billion by 2007) greatly increases the probability of this occurring.

In present times with the advancement of technology there is no need for people to meet face-to-face in order to organize and influence political systems. The advancement of technology in the form of e-mail, faxes, mobile telephones, etc. now allow individuals to communicate directly with each other as well as collect together into special interest groups. These communication technologies

are pivotal in pulling directions away from the core. Recent, smaller communication technologies have weakened the force of social gravity thus throwing the pivotal forces out of balance, and therefore the forces pulling us towards the common core result in being weak (Shaw & Hamm, 1994, p 210).

Public Opinion and the Spiral of Silence

Against a generation of philosophers and researchers grappling with the task of defining public opinion, Noelle-Neumann views public opinion as social control; in this role public opinion promotes social integration and insures a sufficient level of consensus before actions are taken and decisions made (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). The one key aspect of the spiral of silence theory is making a central assumption that societies threaten with isolation all those individuals who deviate from norms, and that individuals, in turn, experience fear of isolation (May, et al 2001). Thus any operational definition of public opinion involves “opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself” (Noelle-Neumann, 1984)

Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory proposes that, individuals will not express their views and opinions if they perceive that their views are not supported by others, fearing isolation. According to the spiral of silence theory, people regularly scan the environment around them to see whether their views are inline with the popular opinion and withdraw from public discussion if they feel they are in their minority, or their opinion is losing popularity – thereby, sometimes, speeding up the demise of their position (Katz, 1983). This quieting of one view results in the one side of the argument dominating public discussion

and the opposing minority arguments declining in number and intensity and subsequently “spiraling into silence” (Perry, 1996).

According to Noelle-Neumann, public opinion is the opinions on controversial issues that one is able to hold and express in public without the fear of isolation (Noelle Neumann, 1984). From this definition, Noelle-Neumann advances five hypotheses on which she bases her theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Firstly, she states that individuals tend to make judgments concerning the distribution of opinion within their social environment and of the ongoing trend of public opinion, thus observing which views are gaining strength and which are declining. Furtheron, she also states that the intensity of the observations not only varies in accordance with the degree of interests within a particular issue, but also to what extent the individual expects to have to vocalize his/her beliefs publicly. These theories rest on the tenet that people fear isolation and believe that exposing themselves as subscribers to an unpopular view could in-turn lead them to becoming shunned by society (Callison & Gonzenbach, 2002).

Noelle-Neumann’s second hypothesis states that the willingness to expose one’s views publicly differs according to individual assessment of the distribution and the trend of opinions within each person’s own social environment (1974, pp.45). A person’s willingness to speak out is much greater if he/she believes that their personal view is, and will be the most dominating one, or will be the one that becomes the most widespread one (Callison & Gonzenbach, 2002).

Noelle-Neumann’s third hypotheses accounts for errors in assessing popular opinions. This particular tenet states that if the assessment of the current distribution of opinion and the actual distribution are clearly divergent, the

differences should then be a result of the opinion whose strength is overestimated and most displayed in public. Such a display often occurs through media (Callison & Gonzenbach, 2002).

In her fourth hypothesis, she suggests that there is a positive correlation between the present and future assessment an individual makes about the state of public opinion. An opinion that appears to be prevalent in the present times will also likely be prevalent in the future but to varying degrees. Noelle-Neumann believes that the opposite holds true for opinions not vocalized; they will be considered even less prevailing in the future. The weaker the correlation between current majority opinion perception and future majority opinion perception, the more public opinion is going through a process of change.

Noelle-Neumann's final hypothesis provides a framework for her theory and asserts that, if there is a degree of divergence in the assessment of the present and future strengths of a belief, it is the expectation of the future position that will determine the extent to which an individual is willing to publicly expose his/her views. This belief stems from the assumption that the cause of the differing degrees of willingness to express an opinion is the individual's fear of isolation if the view is not confirmed by the majority. However, if an individual believes that public opinion is moving in a direction towards his/her view, that person is more likely to express the opinion. In summary, the hypotheses states that individuals form pictures of the distribution of public opinion against which they compare their own beliefs and in the case that their views are different than society's, as they visualize it, they remain silent until they believe that their opinions are on the rise and will not culminate in them being ostracized. This fear

of isolation serves as the cornerstone of the theory and is an idea by research conducted for over two decades before Noelle-Neumann decided to publish her theory (Callison & Gonzenbach, 2002; Gonzenbach, 1992)

Noelle-Neumann has, over the years, conducted a number of field experiments (Noelle-Neumann 1976, 1977, 1984, and 1985) on various issues ranging from smoking in public, to willingness to support the German communist party that have clearly proven the existence of the spiral of silence theory and supported, at one time or another, all of her hypotheses. Gonzenbach (1992) conducted an experiment by manipulating a public opinion indicator that he projected over a newscast interview of George Bush concerning the Iran-Contra affair and found that participants' responses closely matched the fabricated majority public opinion.

Another experiment conducted by Davis Niven (2002) found that media could manipulate popular public opinion and thus lead people to believe one view was more popular, in-turn, making it the popular view. In 1994 however, Gonzenbach and Stevenson conducted an experiment and found that some people who clearly saw themselves in the minority, were still willing to publicize their beliefs. This brings to the forefront the fact that the spiral of silence process is not absolute and a group of people who are hard core believers in the minority view continue to defend their position publicly and do not succumb to silence ((Callison & Gonzenbach, 2002; Gonzenbach & Stevenson, 1994)

One limitation of the spiral of silence argument-and, by extension, the notion of normative influence-is the continued existence of robust and vocal minorities who have fought to change the dominant opinion in the face of explicit

opposition (Hornsey *et al*, 2003). Shamir (1997), for example, conducted an experiment where he examined the willingness of Israelis to speak out about the future of the Palestinian territories. Under such circumstances, it can be argued that the need to express one's cherished values will override the fear of social isolation. Consistent with this notion, Shamir found that 'doves' and 'hawks' in Israel were more willing to speak out about the future of the Palestinian territories when the prevailing government was in opposition to their views than when the government was sympathetic to their views.

Online Communication and the Spiral of Silence

It is clear from research that individuals are more likely to express themselves freely online because of the perception of anonymity than in a “real-world” scenario (McKenna *et al*. 2002). Also, Glynn and McLeod (1985) found that the spiral of silence theory could not predict private acts such as voting, while Gonzenbach and Stevenson (1994) found that perceptions of majority opinion influenced willingness to express one's view more freely, although there perceptions were not always accurate and that some individuals – *the vocal minority* – with a high knowledge of the subject, would speak out whether or not their opinion was the majority view.

Noelle-Neumann's second hypothesis states that an individual is more likely to speak out their opinion if they feel that their view is gaining popularity. An online chat-room created specifically for a certain interest group, with a growing number of members, is likely to give its members a sense that their opinion is gaining popularity and hence the spiral of silence process would be affected and these individuals could become vocal minorities in the “real-world”.

Breaking the spiral of silence can lead to dramatic changes in public opinion. Individuals, believing that they are now not in minority, speak out (Mosher, 1989).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that one's social identity can provide motivation to express opinions, even when it's clear such opinions are in the social minority (May, et al 2001). For example, with reference to the very famous racially polarized, and well publicized O.J. Simpson murder trial, Jeffers, Neuendorf, and Atkin found that minority opinions were not silenced; these authors also concluded that research needs to consider the importance that individuals tend to link issues and various topics based on personal identities (Jeffres, et al. 1999). In a similar manner, Shamir, based upon analysis of opinion expression in Israel argues: "Fear of isolation may be operating on some, but others may be driven by a need to express their deeply cherished values especially when in jeopardy, so as to define themselves and convince others. This motive may eventually override social pressures and encourage people's overt expression of opinions" (Shamir, 1997).

There has been a shift in the ratio of traditional mass media since the birth of more individualized media. There has also been a decline in the ability of the political leaders to hold large social systems, partially due to the fact that citizens are out in search of groups the think like themselves. This loss of community has contributed towards an accelerated loss of mass media, especially because people no longer have as strong a need for mass ties. As a result, national agendas are in danger of fragmenting. Thus, a downward spiral occurs in the use of mass media. Some individuals who find their views reinforced through specialized programs

such as talk-shows or their electronic mail groups have the strength and the courage to stand against, or ignore the masses. The power of evolving technology has given a new-found strength in the hands of millions of ordinary people to both gather and reach out (Shaw & Hamm, 1994, p 210).

Grassroots Activism and Spiral of Silence – Search for the Vocal Minority

Most Grassroots campaigns do not work because they start as the minority view and cannot get enough support to become popular (or majority view).

Researchers have shown that most complaint responses are made by people who have had to face majority alone. For subjects entering the experimental setting with a stranger made fewer complaint responses than those alone, and even fewer such responses were found amongst these subjects who faced majority with a friend (Pollis and Cammalleri, 1968).

The dynamics of online communities can also be looked at from the perspective of Salmon and Kline's (1985) study where they state that outside the laboratory setting, individuals in the minority often find their opinions shared by many others and most importantly, by members of important primary groups, further suggesting that spiral of silence research should take into account the influence of opinion climates within "real" reference groups. Under most circumstances, the range of opinions within society is so diverse that most views shall find acceptance somewhere (May, et al 2001).

The new era has us all wired together as individuals and as groups, not just in national systems, and it is not really clear if we will learn to live in peace or in conflict. The pivotal forces that balance mass media are an important part and

are all very delicately balanced, of which the small communications media form a very important part. (Shaw & Hamm, 1994, p 211).

Grassroots effects have gained a new impetus in influencing the “public affairs organizations” of North America. These techniques allow an organization’s stakeholders to work in the public policy process on behalf of an organization who is seeking to establish and impress its position on those elected officials (Fleisher, 2003). Political organizations and leaders regularly initiate grassroots level campaigns to ‘test the waters’ or to see which way public opinion is swaying. The more the controversial the issue, the more the political organization will prefer to distance itself from it until it has a fair knowledge of public opinion, specifically on controversial issues with a moral backdrop like abortion, gay marriages, etc.

Grassroots comprise of activities such as motivating people to meet with and discuss policy concerns with public officials, inviting them to organizational sites in order to allow mutual exchange with company employees, get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, vote registration drives, political education of stakeholders and various other forms of government relations supporting activities. The prime objectives of these programmes include using allied stakeholders to pass legislation that would further increase industry opportunities or to bring about change within the legislation that would threaten group interests (Fleisher, 2003).

Implications for Internet and Real World Application

Various experiments point to the fact that public opinion, about what is the dominant view, can be manipulated (Niven, 2002, Noelle-Neumann, 1976,

1977, 1984, and 1985, Gonzenbach & Stevenson, 1994, Hornsey *et al*, 2003, and Shamir, 1997). There are also a number of experiments that establish that the spiral of silence process can be stopped (Mosher, 1989, Niven, 2002, Shamir, 1997). As stated earlier, people with “different” and “minority” views are losing power to control the spread of their various political, social, economic, and social agendas as the mass media are declining (Shaw & Hamm, 1994, p 212). Looking at these phenomena from another angle, one can argue that this weakness of the spiral of silence theory in the virtual world can be exploited by people in the minority to start and manage grassroots campaigns to spread their various agendas.

A minority group, which wants support for a particular issue, specifically a controversial issue, may first create a few online communities addressing that issue(s), on a grassroots level, to assess public opinion (not necessarily majority opinion). Even if a very few individuals support that issue, they will become a part of these communities, which will grow in numbers and will give rise to the vocal minority which will subsequently take the issue into the real-world, with or without the added support of the media. Also, as these communities get enough number of members, Noelle-Neumann’s second tenet will come into effect and individual members will perceive a universal growth in support for their views and will thus express their views in the real world without fear of isolation or rebuttal.

The benefit to the managers of these various grassroots campaigns would be that they would not have to be publicly involved till there is enough support generated. Also, studying the responses on the online communities, they could

modify, change or even cancel their agenda without any negative repercussions. On the other hand, if an individual or group is opposed to a particular issue, it can garner enough support for their opposing point of view – through the effective use of the abovementioned online communities – to affect the issue and its acceptance by the concerned publics and the media.

Operational Definitions

Public Opinion – “Opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself” (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

Spiral of Silence – “Reaction to openly visible approval and disapproval among shifting constellations of values” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974)

Computer Mediated Communications – CMC, first developed in 1970 by Murray Turoff (Harasim, 1990), is an effective electronic means of connecting learners without time and location constraints using computers (Machtmes & Asher, 2000). Or, CMC can be defined as, “communication that is exchanged over a computer network. In this case, the Web provides the platform and computer conferencing system software provides the structure and tools” (www.coexploration.org). for the purpose of this study, CMC was limited to traditional computer mediated communication techniques and excluded all modern social media platforms as there is a growing body of research focusing on social media-based communications.

Online Networked Community- A networked community is defined as a group of users who interact and communicate using networked computers. The research of social interaction and communication among members of a

networked community is one of three primary approaches to research on CMC (Harris & Jones 2000).

Minority Views – Noelle-Neumann (1974) quotes Locke to further her case on minority public opinion, "Solitude many men have sought, and been reconciled to: but nobody that has the least thought or sense of a man about him can live in society under the constant dislike and ill opinion of his familiars and those he converses with. This is a burden too heavy for human sufferance."

Research Questions

RQ1: Will online communication-based Websites like message boards, online communities, blogs, etc. provide a forum for people with minority views to connect with each other and express themselves freely?

RQ2: As more people express their views in favor of the initial minority position within the online environment, will the minority view holders express themselves more freely within that online environment?

RQ3: As more people join the online environment, will it give rise to a vocal minority which will take the issue into the real world?

RQ4: How will these real world expressions get support in the real world?

Method

As this study required an in-depth look into the cognitions, motivations, interactions, and actions of individuals and groups online and offline, there was a need for employing research methods that would yield the appropriate insight[s]. Hence, this was a qualitative study and the methods used were primarily qualitative research methods. The two main qualitative research methods

preferred for this type of analysis were textual analysis and online observations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Textual Analysis – According to Acosta-Alzuru and Roushanzamir (2000) textual analysis basically helps in analyzing the meaning of the text and how those meanings are constructed through the use of that text. Text was studied on two levels; First, web postings on online communities like discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, etc. were analyzed from two main perspectives; first each individual text (post) was studied and the online identity of the writers was noted. This process was conducted for the original post and all the responses thereof. The second perspective involved an in-depth analysis of the interactions between writers through their texts (postings). The focus was on looking for any developing or changing inter-textual patterns in the actual texts (posts) as affected by responses of individuals and the number of individuals responding (if affected at all), as judged by the researcher, and confirmed by an independent expert. In other words, marginal and cumulative changes were identified and studied. The second level of textual analysis involved studying real-world patterns developing online and offline as related to the abovementioned texts.

A second popular qualitative research method is Field Observations – however, this usually requires the observer to be physically present in between a interaction dynamic and needs (at-least) two-way synchronous communications in addition to making the participants aware of the observer's presence (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) . Online communication environments like message boards, blogs, etc. usually employ asynchronous communication models and it is very difficult to make all participants aware of the researcher's presence. Hence

although this was a mix of two methods; field observations and textual analysis, for the purpose of this study we will be referring to the method as textual analysis.

Pilot Study

This pilot study was conducted to gain insight into the problems of measuring and studying Spiral of Silence, and to clarify, explain, and justify the final study. For this purpose, we studied one thread of posts on two Websites, www.ProtestWarrior.com, and www.freerepublic.com. These Websites are message board forums where people with any issue[s] can post messages, explain their issues, and maybe generate some support and ideas. They are among the most popular forums for these purposes (www.washingtonpost.com) and have many topics and issues listed in their index pages (see appendix A).

Method

The discussion thread I chose was called “Send a Brick to Congress” and was first posted on these Websites on April 12, 2006. A search of the Web also revealed that the same discussion threads started on the same date on www.ARF.COM and some other Websites which are Websites for grassroots campaigns and protests (www.washingtonpost.com). For the purposes of this pilot study, the textual analysis was limited to the posts on www.ProtestWarrior.com and www.freerepublic.com. To ensure that all the posts and replies to the original message were included in the study, all the posts were retrieved well after the discussion thread had ended

Also, to research the real world effects of these online interactions, Web searches were performed using www.Google.com, the world's leading internet search portal. The "Advanced Search" tool within the Google Webpage was used and six distinct searches were performed for the term "Send a Brick to Congress". The first five searched were searching for the term, "Send a Brick to Congress" for the months of January only (excluding February, March, April, and May using the "Advanced Search" tool), February only, March only, April only, and May only (excluding other months to avoid results including repetitions). The last search was for the term "Send a Brick to Congress" but it did not limit the search by time so the results were for the marginal and cumulative months of January, February, March, April, and May. The second level of analysis involved analyzing only the first Google results page for two pieces of information; the total number of hits on the Web, and how many of the 10 results on the first page were directly mentioning the "Send a Brick to Congress" campaign in any way.

Results

A textual analysis of the postings on the www.ProtestWarrior.com and www.freerepublic.com message boards revealed that the idea for "Send a Brick to Congress" was originally proposed by a person with the online name of "axl" in March 2006 on the www.ar15.com message boards (<http://www.ar15.com/forums/topic.html?b=1&f=5&t=454432&page=3>). However the original idea was to "donate an eight- inch block and ship it to congress" to cause disturbances at the congress building and to show anger towards the government. On April 12, 2006 an individual by the name of *DeadCorpse* and *Rev. DeadCorpse* (on www.freerepublic.com and

www.ProtestWarrior .com message boards respectively) started posting his/her version of the idea on popular Web message forums (see Appendix B). His/her version of the idea was that everyone should send a brick to congress using USPS mail service (the only mail service authorized to take postal deliveries *into* the Capitol building) to protest the immigration issue and as a symbolic gesture to build a wall between the Unites States and Mexico.

An analysis of the message posting threads on www.freerepublic.com revealed that the “Send a Brick to Congress” movement had started on this Website before it went to www.ProtestWarrior.com. It was revealed that *DeadCorpse* posted the following message on April 12 2006 at 7.23 am;

“Do you realize how cool it would be if every person pissed off about this shit (illegal Aliens/wide open borders) actually shipped a cinderblock to the capitol? Just a thought. “

DeadCorpse got the first reply at 7.27 am on the same day followed by two at 7.28 am, three at 7.29 am, two at 7.30 am, two at 7.31 am, three at 7.33 am, and so on. This continued till 8.24 am on April 12, 2006 when the Website decided to end the discussion thread. Within this span of one hour and one minute, *DeadCorpse* had posted for a total of 7 times, had gotten a total of 24 direct responses in addition to another 19 posts which were of people interacting with each other (not with *DeadCorpse* directly) about the idea, totaling 50 posts within one hour.

On April 12, 2006 at 9.26 am, (one hour after the message thread had ended on www.freerepublic.com) *Rev. DeadCorpse* posted his same original

message on www.ProtestWarrior.com. *DeadCorpse's* first post is as follows (see Appendix B);

“Do you realize how cool it would be if every person pissed off about this shit (illegal Aliens/wide open borders) actually shipped a cinderblock to the capitol? Just a thought. “

The first reply *Rev. DeadCorpse* got was almost 24 hours after his/her original post on April 13, 2006 at 9.46 am. It was by a person with the online name, SNGMKG who wrote,

“Try to get this out there the best you can because I think it may get the point across. I think a better idea would be to get enough people together to spend the \$ 10 on renting a cargo plane and dumping tons of bricks [sic] on top of the white house. I don't think anything is going to get through to these politicians”.

After this post, *Rev. DeadCorpse* posted three more times at very short intervals (see Appendix B) and explained to people that he/she had set up a Website which would give details about the program and that he/she was also in the process of sending out press releases to major newspapers, radio and television stations. By the time the post thread ended on April 25 2006, *Rev. DeadCorpse* had 4 replies, all of which were positive and encouraging.

An analysis of search results using www.Google.com searching for “Send a Brick to Congress” using the “Google advanced search tools” to control for overlapping of results revealed that;

- * For January, there were 37,100 results, and none of the search result links on the first page referred to the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign.

- * For February, there were 20,900 results, and none of the search result links on the first page referred to the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign.
- * For March, there were 73,700 results, and seven of the ten search result links on the first page referred to the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign.
- * For April, there were 65,000 results, and all ten of ten search result links on the first page referred to the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign.
- * For May, there were 134,000 results, and all ten of the ten search result links on the first page referred to the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign.
- * The search results for “Send a Brick to Congress” not limiting the search by months revealed a total of 2,550,000 results and all ten of the ten search result links on the first page referred to the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign.

During this stage of analysis, I came across the official Website of the campaign which was started on April 12, 2006 and which was restructured on April 25, 2006. The earlier version of the Website was just one page and listed the campaign while the new version is a very elaborate Website and has various links like press rooms, links to companies that will send the brick for you, payment gateways, counters of how many people have visited the Website and how many bricks have been sent, etc.

Discussion

This study attempted to study the results of online interactions between people with minority views and how that could affect Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory in general and her second hypothesis in particular. Noelle-

Neumann's second hypothesis states that the willingness to expose one's views publicly differs according to individual assessment of the distribution and the trend of opinions within each person's own social environment (1974, pp.45). A person's willingness to speak out is much greater if he/she believes that their personal view is, and will be the most dominating one, or will be the one that becomes the most widespread one (Callison & Gonzenbach, 2002).

The central argument of this study is that online communities provide a forum for people with like-minded views to connect with each other and express their views freely. This normally applies to people with all kinds of views – from the common, every day views to the more rare, obscure, and even weird views. Everyone can find someone online who thinks like them. In the case of this pilot study, I was interested in observing that, with the immense growth of online communications, could enough support for a rare idea actually cause more people to come out and express that idea online and whether this expression of idea a by few people within an online environment, would give rise to the “vocal minority” who would actually take the idea out of the online environment and introduce it and express it freely in the offline/real-world.

An analysis of the message posts on www.ProtestWarrior.com and www.freere-public.com shows that as more people agreed with *DeadCorpse's* (the original author of the “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign) ideas, the more motivated and detailed he/she got about the campaign and that caused more people to express their agreement with the idea within those online environments. All this affirmation online caused *DeadCorpse* to create a Website (www.send-a-brick.com) which first only listed some details about the campaign

and which changed in 10 days to become a high-tech Website – comparable to any modern business Website with links to press rooms, payment gateways, visitor counters, and other links. Also, within a span of 20 days, the campaign had generated enough “buzz” to be featured in the New York Times, The Washington Post, Fox News, the Rush Limbaugh Show, among many other news sources (<http://www.send-a-brick.com/media.htm>). The official “Send a Brick to Congress” campaign Website (which DeadCorpse created after he/she had generated enough support online) has gotten more than 100,000 different viewers and has sold almost 6000 bricks, all within a span of 10 days of being revamped to become operational from a business perspective.

Analysis of Internet search results using www.Google.com revealed patterns in the real world mirroring the popularity of the campaign online – proving that the growth of online communications negates the effects of spiral of silence theory and gives rise to the “vocal minority” which takes the issues and publicize them till they no longer *appear* to be the minority views. This further causes more people to support them more openly – online and in the real world.

Limitations & Future Research

The most significant limitation of this study is that it is very difficult to accurately measure spiral of silence (presence or reversal). Although this study has attempted to measure the presence and reversal of the spiral of silence from a qualitative perspective, it is very difficult to measure from a statistical perspective and hence it would be difficult to generalize the results on a larger scale. Another limitation of this study is that, it can be argued that, the abovementioned phenomena are not really the effects of spiral of silence and that there exist other

explanations for the same. Lastly, it is not established whether the abovementioned methods are the best way of measuring spiral of silence and its effects. Traditional spiral of silence research has concentrated on studying majority/minority discourse using face-to-face, synchronous, verbal and non-verbal communication models. Communication researchers do not appreciate the research potential of the internet (Morris & Ogan, 1996). More research needs to be conducted on an empirical level combining the spiral of silence theory and the use of online communication models to increase scholarship and knowledge of the field.

The other main limitation of this study was that, although blogs and discussion boards are a part of social media, this pilot study excluded all modern forms of social media like Facebook, Twitter, etc. the researchers intentionally left these platforms out because each one is unique in its presentation and allows for proprietary technology based communications among users. Also, many of these modern platforms do reveal the users' identity and that may be affecting communications. Future research should compare the communications among online communication platforms and contrast them based on whether or not the users' identity is revealed.

Also, researchers intentionally included discussion forums where most of the topics being discussed had political undertones. This was done because people seem to be more motivated and passionate about their political beliefs and qualitative analysis of views was possible. Future research should also focus on analyzing online communications based on a wider variety of issues and not just ones with political undertones.

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