

SPIRAL OF SILENCE

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Suskunluk Sarmalı

Kamuoyu oluşumu, iletişim alanının en önemli konularından biridir. Kamuoyunun nasıl oluştuğu, halkın düşüncelerindeki değişimler, bu değişimlerin nedenleri ve kamuoyunun gücü iletişim bilimciler tarafından ayrıntılı olarak araştırılmakta ve elde ettikleri bulgular, yeni teorilerin temelini oluşturmaktadır.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Almanya'da II. Dünya Savaşı öncesi ve esnasında kamuoyunun nasıl oluştuğunu araştırmıştır. Noelle-Neumann, Alman halkının 1930 ve 40'lı yıllarda, sonu ulusal yenilgi ve ayıplanma ile biten hatalı siyasal pozisyonlar benimsemiş olduğunun farkında idi ve bunun nedenlerini araştırmak istedi. Elde ettiği bulgular sonucunda, 1974 yılında "suskunluk sarmalı" olarak bilinen teori ortaya çıktı.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann'e göre; yeni fikirler gündeme geldiği zaman, insanlar bu fikirler konusundaki görüşlerini açıklamadan önce, başkalarının aynı konu hakkında ne düşündüğüne bakarlar. Eğer kendi düşüncelerinin destek

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bulacağına kanaat getirirlerse, o konu hakkında konuşmaları muhtemeldir. Ama destek bulamayacaklarını sezerlerse, suskun kalırlar. Suskun kalanların karşısında konuşanlar, kendi düşünceleri hakkında giderek büyüyen bir destek buldukları izlenimini verirler ve daha da cesur hale gelirler. İşte bir tarafın konuşma konusunda giderek büyüyen cesareti ile diğer tarafın suskunluğunun kombinasyonu “suskunluk sarmalı”nı yaratır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kamuoyu oluşumu, izole olma korkusu, suskunluk sarmalı.

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Public opinion is one of the important topics in communication studies. How the public opinion is formed, shifts in public opinion, the causes of these changes and the power of public opinion have been researched by communication scholars and their findings inspired the creation of new theories.

One of these scholars, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, investigated how public opinion was formed in Germany before and during World War II, based on her social and political experiences as a pollster there. She knew that the German people had adopted wrong political positions in the 1930s and 40s, which led to national defeat and humiliation. So, she searched for the reasons of how all this happened. Based on the findings of her study, she formulated the “spiral of silence” theory in 1974.(Stone; v.d. 1999:260)

Noelle-Neumann argued that when new ideas arise among strangers, individuals make a quick assessment in regard to what

the others think before offering their own private opinion. She called the process by which people sense moods and changes in public opinion the quasi-statistical sense. If people perceive support for their own opinions, they will be more likely to speak up. On the other hand, if they sense opposition, they will be more likely to remain silent. If some people remain silent, those who do speak up seem to have even greater support on their side and can be bolder. The combined boldness of one side and the silence of the other creates the **spiral of silence**. (Stone; 1999:260-261)

Noelle-Neumann stresses fear of isolation as the first element in the spiral of silence theory. This notion suggests that people can alter their behaviour due to a fear of isolation. For example, when they perceive their opinion to be at odds with that of majority, they will suppress their own expression and remain silent in an attempt to avoid social isolation/ostracism. On the other hand, when they perceive their opinion to be congruent with that of the majority, they will be more likely to express their own expression. (Noelle-Neumann; 1989:6) She further argued that self-doubt was also an important factor in the spiral of silence. She said, "it is not only fear of isolation but **doubt about one's capacity for judgment** that makes the individual vulnerable." (Stone; 1999:261)

According to Noelle-Neumann, the effect of not speaking out is **pluralistic ignorance**, "the result that a large group of people erroneously believe that the direction and strength of public opinion on an issue is exactly opposite what it really is." (Stone; 1999: 261) It is this misperception of the public opinion

that allows those in the minority to feel comfortable speaking up on an issue while a silent majority exists among the opposition. Noelle-Neumann argued that the media, especially television, could contribute to this misperception. She stated, "television with its color and sound [that] creates extensive confusion between one's own observation and mediated observation." (Noelle-Neumann; 1984:155-156)

While some studies have supported the theory of spiral of silence, some others have not. In a study done in conservative Orange County, California, the authors found no support for the spiral of silence theory. The study reported that Democrats were as willing as Republicans to speak out despite their known minority opinion (Katz ve Bladassare; 1992:232-235). On the other hand, in a study about the investigation of the spiral of silence during the Persian Gulf War, the authors found support for the theory. It appeared that participants of the study were less supportive of the war than the popular support depicted by the media. People, who watched television and perceived that the public supported the war, were more likely to support the war themselves. This study also found that people exhibited spiral of silence not because of fear of social isolation, but because they are swayed by bandwagon effects. (Eveland; 1995:91-109)

In their meta-analysis of 17 published spiral-theory articles, Glynn et al. (1997) found small but statistically significant spiral effect, leading them to conclude, "there was little evidence to support the claim that willingness to express opinions is influenced by perceived support for those opinions." (Stone; 1999:263)

Oshagan (1996) investigated the role of reference groups in individuals' willingness to express their opinions about an issue. He found that those who stand with their reference group are more likely to express personal opinions. He also confirmed that if reference group and social majority are opposed, reference group opinion is more likely to prevail. Based on these findings, Oshagan concluded that since there were no significant main effects for the influence of social majority, there was no support for spiral of silence. His findings indicated the importance of reference group opinion, as opposed to social majority. (Oshagan; 2001:355)

In their recent research, Perry and Gonzenbach (2000) focused on the role of exemplars in individual willingness to speak up when the issue is controversial and morally loaded. Their controversial and morally loaded issue was a prayer in school constitutional amendment. As a result, they found no support for exemplars predictably causing a spiral of silence, but there was a mild evidence that perceived opinion can silence public display expression. (Perry ve Gonzenbach; 2000:268-281)

In the research of spiral of silence, researchers have identified several factors as dependent and independent variables. Dependent variables would be willingness to speak up on a new issue in the presence of others and the difference between self and perceived others. On the other hand, independent variables are identified as fear of isolation; self-doubt; self-esteem; proximity of discussion; relevance, salience of topic; uniqueness of the idea; number and relationship of persons nearby; the role of reference groups; and personality attributes. Other variables that can have effect on spiral of silence are education; age; experience

in the group; level of knowledge, and previous success. Noelle-Neumann saw the spiral as a function of social control. (Class Notes, Singletary: 2001)

The media were thought as a significant factor in the spiral of silence by some researchers, but then it was found that the media have more important role in priming and framing, rather than the spiral of silence.

Criticisms:

While the spiral of silence has had the attention of many researchers to date, some scholars have pointed out the weaknesses of the theory from both theoretical and methodological grounds. These scholars claimed that Noelle-Neumann's concepts were not always clearly defined and explained. (Glynn ve McLeod; 1984: 731-740)

Conclusion:

Research on the spiral of silence has not been as frequent and deep as the research on agenda-setting, cultivation, priming and framing. However, it has brought reasonable explanations in regard to how public opinion is formed and pointed out the role of several variables on the people's willingness to speak up. More research is needed to set the theory in depth and to identify the role of other important factors in the explanation of the spiral of silence.

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