

FROM THE FEAR OF ISOLATION TO THE FEAR OF EXPOSURE: REINTERPRETING THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY IN THE PLATFORM SOCIETY

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The transformations produced by digitalization, platformization, and algorithmic mediation reconfigure the mechanisms for forming and expressing public opinion. The *Spiral of Silence* theory, formulated by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, explains the dynamics of self-censorship through the perception of the majority and the fear of social isolation. In the context of the platform society, these mechanisms are reshaped by the economy of visibility, the logic of digital metrics, as well as online reputational sanctions. Within this conceptual framework, the notion of the *Exposure Spiral* is outlined, which describes self-censorship driven by fear of public exposure and digital stigmatization. At the same time, the introduction of the concept of algorithmic public opinion highlights the role of technological infrastructure in shaping the perception of the majority and in shaping contemporary discursive behavior.

Keywords: *spiral of silence, spiral of exposure, algorithmic public opinion, platform society, economy of visibility, algorithms, self-censorship, discursive conformity.*

DE LA FRICA DE IZOLARE LA FRICA DE EXPUNERE: REINTERPRETAREA TEORIEI SPIRALA TĂCERII ÎN SOCIETATEA PLATFORMELOR

Transformările produse de digitalizare, platformizare și mediere algoritmică reconfigurează mecanismele de formare și exprimare a opiniei publice. Teoria *Spiralei tăcerii*, formulată de Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, explică dinamica autocenzurii prin percepția majorității și prin frica de izolare socială. În contextul societății platformelor, aceste mecanisme sunt remodelate de economia vizibilității, de logica metricilor digitale, precum și de sancțiunea reputațională online. În acest cadru conceptual este conturată noțiunea de *Spirală a expunerii*, care descrie autocenzura determinată de frica de expunere publică și de stigmatizare digitală. Totodată, introducerea conceptului de opinie publică algoritmică evidențiază rolul infrastructurii tehnologice în configurarea percepției majorității și în modelarea comportamentului discursiv contemporan.

Cuvinte-cheie: *spirala tăcerii, spirala expunerii, opinie publică algoritmică, societatea platformelor, economia vizibilității, algoritmi, autocenzură, conformare discursivă.*

Introduction

Mass communication theories have gradually moved beyond the paradigm of direct and immediate influence, evolving toward more sophisticated models capable of explaining the subtle, cumulative, and symbolic mechanisms by which social reality is constructed. Within this broader theoretical framework, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *Spiral of Silence* - first articulated in the 1970s, continues to serve as a seminal point of reference for scholars examining the relationship between mass media and public opinion formation. Rather than emphasizing the direct impact of media messages, the theory shifts analytical focus toward the mechanisms through which the perception of majority opinion, combined with the anticipated fear of social isolation, fosters self-censorship and discursive conformity among individuals.

The theory is grounded in the assumption that individuals continuously observe and evaluate fluctuations in public opinion, assessing their own positions against what they perceive to be the prevailing consensus at any given moment. When personal viewpoints are perceived to conflict with this prevailing consensus, individuals tend to respond through discursive withdrawal and silent conformity. This cumulative retreat sets in motion a self-reinforcing dynamic whereby minority perspectives progressively diminish from public discourse, while dominant opinions acquire increased visibility, social acceptance, and perceived legitimacy [6].

The communicative environment with which the *Spiral of Silence* was originally formulated differs substantially from its contemporary configuration. Intensive digitalization, platform-specific communicative logics, algorithmic content curation, trolling practices, and the economy of visibility have collectively transformed the relationship between public expression, symbolic sanction, and discursive legitimacy. Within digital environments, the risks associated with public expression extend far beyond the mere possibility of social isolation. They now encompass permanent public exposure, the archival persistence and potential reactivation of prior discourse, as well as the constant threat of viral stigmatization.

Against this backdrop, the present study proposes a conceptual reinterpretation of the *Spiral of Silence*, critically reassessing its foundational premises in relation to the transformations generated by digitalization and platformization. The analysis is structured around three complementary lines of inquiry:

1. A re-evaluation of the classical theoretical foundations underpinning the model;
2. An examination of the emergence of a *Spiral of Exposure* within the cultural and communicative logic of digital platforms;
3. A conceptual delineation of *algorithmic public opinion* as an evolutionary expression of contemporary mechanisms of symbolic conformity.

Context

The *Spiral of Silence*: premises and theoretical developments

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann initially developed the *Spiral of Silence* within the context of her research on public opinion in postwar Germany. Her central argument was that mass media do not merely reflect social reality, but function as constitutive forces in shaping the broader climate of public opinion [5, pp. 34-37].

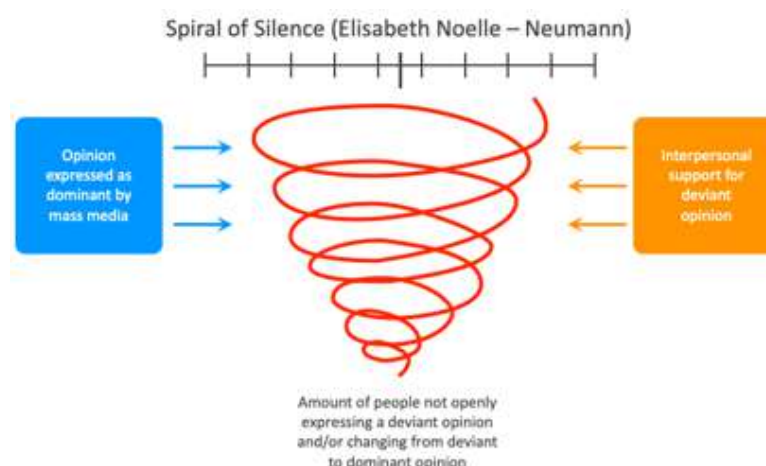
At the core of the theory lies the *fear of isolation*, understood not merely as a contingent psychological response, but as a fundamental anthropological mechanism that compels individuals to avoid social exclusion and marginalization.

The model is grounded in several foundational theoretical premises:

- a. The fear of social isolation and the countervailing human desire for social integration, two forces that together generate a persistent pressure toward conformity;
- b. Society exhibits a tendency to marginalize individuals who deviate from or refuse to internalize majority norms;
- c. The continuous assessment of the prevailing state of public opinion, undertaken under the anticipatory weight of potential exclusion;
- d. Behavioral responses through which individuals seek to align with the cognitive and normative expectations that society projects as dominant;
- e. The gradual abandonment of nonconformist positions and a progressive convergence toward generally accepted norms [10, p. 45].

It is precisely this cumulative mechanism that Noelle-Neumann conceptualized through the metaphor of the *spiral*. As a particular viewpoint comes to appear increasingly dominant, dissenting voices gradually retreat from public expression, thereby reinforcing the appearance of a hegemonic consensus. Central to this process is what Noelle-Neumann termed the *quasi-statistical sense* - individuals' capacity to discern the direction of prevailing opinion through cues derived from both media discourse and everyday social interaction. In this regard, mass media operate simultaneously as indicators of perceived majority sentiment and as symbolic amplifiers that extend and consolidate their influence.

Subsequent theoretical scholarship has positioned the *Spiral of Silence* within the broader family of models concerned with the gradual and symbolic influence of mass media, underscoring its distinctive contribution to understanding the formation of climates of public opinion and the regulation of patterns of social expression [4]. Whereas theories of direct persuasion concentrate narrowly on shifts in individual attitudes, Noelle-Neumann's model redirects analytical attention toward the dynamics of public expression itself, specifically toward the conditions under which opinions are publicly articulated or, alternatively, suppressed in response to perceived majority sentiment.



Spiral of Silence theory

Sursa: COLLIDU. *Spiral of Silence*. Available: <https://www.collidu.com/presentation-spiral-of-silence>

The theory has not, however, remained beyond critical scrutiny. Scholars have challenged several of its foundational assumptions: *the tendency to overstate the uniformity and coherence of mass media output; an insufficient reckoning with media pluralism; the marginalizing of active minority groups capable of resisting dominant opinion climates; and the model's limited explanatory applicability within societies marked by strong individualist orientations and high degrees of discursive diversity.*

Empirical studies have demonstrated that the spiral effect does not operate uniformly across contexts, but is instead conditioned by a range of contextual variables, among them the degree of controversy surrounding a given issue, the configuration of relevant social identities, and the extent of public participation. Collectively, these findings reinforce the view that public opinion cannot be adequately grasped as a simple statistical aggregation of individual preferences. It emerges, rather, as the dynamic outcome of intersecting forces such as perceived visibility, normative pressure, and the ongoing processes through which individuals adjust their discursive positioning.

From the *Spiral of Silence* to the *Spiral of Exposure*: reconfiguring mechanisms of conformity in the culture of digital platforms

The advent of digitalization, platformization, and algorithmization has significantly transformed the conditions under which public opinion is formed and expressed. Whereas Noelle-Neumann's classical formulation grounded discursive withdrawal in the fear of social isolation, the contemporary media environment points toward the emergence of a qualitatively distinct phenomenon, a *Spiral of Exposure*, in which the primary risk is no longer exclusion from the social group but permanent public visibility and digital sanction. This transformation does not render the original theoretical framework obsolete; on the contrary, it calls for its relocation within a broader interpretative framework. The *Spiral of Silence* continues to hold analytical relevance as a conceptual lens for examining the dynamics of discursive conformity, even as these dynamics are increasingly shaped by new forms of normative pressure and by technological infrastructures that simultaneously intensify visibility and prolong the persistence of public discourse.

The displacement of the *fear of isolation* by the *fear of exposure* signals a substantial transformation in the underlying logic of discursive conformity. Within digital environments, the prospect of social isolation is increasingly accompanied, and in certain contexts supplanted, by the fear of permanent public visibility, a dynamic sustained by several structural features of online communication:

- *the permanence of digital memory*, whereby previously articulated opinions are archived and can be reactivated.
- as Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argues, the digital realm preserves what might sometimes be better forgotten, a reality that carries profound implications for each of us [3];
- *the amplification of visibility* through viral dissemination mechanisms;

- *the reputational economy*, whereby professional identity becomes increasingly intertwined with digital self-presentation and sustained online presence;

- *the possibility of immediate collective sanction*, manifested in rapid, large-scale punitive reactions.

Under these conditions, self-censorship ceases to be driven solely by the desire for social integration, extending instead to encompass the protection of symbolic and reputational capital. The *Spiral of Exposure* may accordingly be conceptualized as a socio-communicative mechanism through which individuals modulate their public expression in order to anticipate and avoid digital stigmatization, ridicule, or forms of collective sanction.

The operational logic of digital platforms further intensifies these dynamics through the establishment of a visibility economy and the systematic quantification of interaction. Popularity indicators: *likes*, *shares*, and *comments* - function not merely as feedback mechanisms, but increasingly as instruments of social validation and as mechanisms shaping the perception of majority opinion. Consequently, the climate of public opinion is apprehended less through traditional journalistic mediation or opinion polling than through digital indicators and algorithmic trend signals. This economy of visibility exerts subtle yet consequential pressures on users, encouraging strategies of digital identity management, selective self-expression, and the deliberate avoidance of contentious subjects. In addition, platform algorithms tend to privilege emotionally charged and conflict-driven content, thereby amplifying discursive polarization and consolidating the impression of dominant majorities. Taken together, these processes directly feeds into and intensify the dynamics of the *Spiral of Exposure*.

Platform metrics and online visibility introduce additional dynamics within the broader framework of platform capitalism. On the one hand, digital indicators such as likes, content sharing, or follower counts function as forms of symbolic and social capital, producing recognition, influence, and, in some cases, economic opportunities. On the other hand, the logic of platform governance reshapes creative priorities and intensifies productivity pressures, compelling content creators to continuously adjust to algorithmic requirements while negotiating the tension between authenticity and strategic self-promotion [7].

A defining element of these dynamics is the phenomenon of *cancel culture*, which entered wide spread debate around 2016 and functions as a mechanism of discursive discipline and symbolic sanction. The public sanctioning of individuals or organizations for opinions considered unacceptable generates significant reputational and professional consequences, ranging from stigmatization and coordinated boycotts to forms of symbolic exclusion from social and professional communities. Even in the absence of an actual sanction, the mere possibility of exposure and stigmatization can produce self-censorship and preventive conformity. According to the definition provided by Merriam-Webster, the term refers to: *the practice or tendency of engaging in mass canceling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure* [1].

Such pressures are not, however, evenly distributed. Individuals and organizations occupying positions of greater public visibility bear a disproportionate exposure to the risk of digital sanction and, as a consequence, tend to develop more elaborate strategies for managing their public discourse. This asymmetry underscores the differentiated character of the *Spiral of Exposure*, whose dynamics vary considerably according to one's symbolic capital and professional status.

Within this context, trolling emerges as a significant force in the construction of discursive insecurity. Aggressive commentary, ad hominem attacks, and sustained digital harassment erode the willingness to express opinions publicly, a chilling effect felt most acutely by women, minority groups, and public figures. Self-censorship thus assumes the character of a self-protective strategy, with contentious views either suppressed or displaced toward spaces perceived as safer and less exposed. Within platform society, digital identity has become progressively intertwined with professional identity, and an individual's online history can directly influence social standing and career trajectories. This interdependence gives rise to refined strategies of self-monitoring and discursive fragmentation: opinions are expressed selectively, carefully contextualized, or confined to private communities, while broader public arenas are increasingly circumvented or avoided.

Within this framework, the *Spiral of Exposure* may be conceptualized as an emergent theoretical model complementary to the *Spiral of Silence*. Whereas the classical model accounts for self-censorship through the fear of social isolation, the contemporary model reinterprets it in terms of the fear of public exposure and digital stigmatization.



Spiral of Silence vs. Spiral of Exposure

Source: conceptual framework developed by the author, image generated with the assistance of AI tools.

Spiral of silence (classical paradigm)	Spiral of exposure (classical paradigm)
Fear of social isolation	Fear of public exposure
Traditional mass media environment	Digital platforms and algorithmic infrastructures
Perceived majority consensus	Algorithmically mediated visibility
Self-censorship through discursive withdrawal	Strategic and selective self-censorship
Relatively stable public sphere	Fragmented and polarized public sphere

Source: author's elaboration

Such a reconceptualization does not imply the abandonment of the original theoretical framework, but rather its integration into an expanded analytical model that accommodates technological, cultural, and reputational dimensions. The theoretical implications are manifold:

- the extension of the socio-psychological framework of self-censorship to encompass the role of technological infrastructure;
- the incorporation of the algorithmic dimension into the processes through which majority opinion is perceived and internalized;
- the reconceptualization of public opinion as an inherently dynamic and contested construct;
- the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach drawing on digital sociology, media studies, and the normative analysis of digital technologies.

Taken as a whole, the *Spiral of Exposure* emerges as a theoretically productive framework for interpreting discursive behavior within platform societies. It brings into relief the extent to which silence is no longer solely the product of majority pressure, but is also shaped by the risks associated with digital visibility and the management of public reputation.

Algorithmic public opinion: from the perception of the majority to the computed majority

Within the ecosystem of digital platforms, algorithms serve as the central mediators of informational flows, governing which content achieves visibility, which opinions are amplified, and which perspectives remain peripheral. This capacity grants algorithms a structural role both in shaping the perceived landscape of majority opinion and in establishing the parameters of the public agenda.

Unlike traditional mass media, where the selection and hierarchical ordering of information was entrusted to journalistic and professional institutions, the digital sphere has seen the public agenda fall increasingly

under the governance of automated systems operating according to criteria such as relevance, popularity, interaction history, and engagement potential. These criteria are not normatively neutral, rather, they reflect the economic and technological logic of platforms, thereby transforming the perception of dominant opinion into the output of algorithmic computation. Users do not access the full diversity of existing viewpoints directly, but rather a filtered and hierarchically ordered version thereof, produced through mechanisms of selective visibility.

Selective visibility in media refers to the differentiated presentation of information, a condition in which certain narratives are foregrounded while others are consigned to the margins, with consequential effects on public perceptions and patterns of action. Conceptually, the notion builds on established theoretical frameworks, most notably agenda-setting and framing, from which it derives its core analytical orientations. The component term *selective signals* a non-random process of attentional allocation, whereby particular pieces of information are privileged over others, while *visibility* speaks to the degree of public awareness and discursive salience that any given content attains [9].

Among the most consequential effects of algorithmic public opinion is the generation of an illusion of consensus. The systematic amplification of certain positions through recommendation mechanisms systems, and trending mechanisms may produce the impression of a dominant majority even in the absence of any genuine collective agreement.

This manufactured perception directly influences users' discursive behavior, inclining them toward either conformity or withdrawal from public expression. Within the logic of the *Spiral of Silence*, the perception of majority opinion constitutes the triggering condition for self-censorship. In digital environments, however, this perception is no longer socially negotiated but is increasingly algorithmically constructed through metrics of popularity and visibility.

The *Spiral of Silence* and the *Spiral of Exposure* thus converge within a broader mechanism in which algorithms operate as active producers of the climate of public opinion. This dynamic is further compounded by the existence of *echo chambers* and *information bubbles*, whereby content personalization reduces exposure to divergent viewpoints, reinforces the perception of internal consensus, and ultimately deepens polarization between communities.

Echo chambers and *information bubbles* are metaphorical constructs that capture growing concerns that the use of social networks may limit the types of information to which users are exposed in the online environment, thereby reducing the possibility of a shared informational experience based on the free circulation of ideas. More specifically, the concern lies in the fact that the algorithms of digital platforms, combined with users' tendency to interact primarily with individuals who share similar views, may create an informational environment in which users are predominantly exposed to content that confirms their own beliefs, while diverse or contradictory perspectives become less visible [2].

The fragmentation of the public sphere represents another defining characteristic of algorithmic public opinion. Rather than operating as a unified arena of deliberation, the public sphere has reconfigured itself as a network of distinct discursive communities, each sustaining its own dominant climate of opinion and its own mechanisms of conformity. Under these conditions, it becomes untenable to speak of a single *Spiral of Silence*, what emerges instead is a plurality of spirals operating simultaneously across different digital contexts. Positions that constitute a minority in one discursive space may well command dominance in another. Individuals calibrate their expressive behavior accordingly, adjusting to the platform, the audience, and the reputational stakes at hand. Public expression thus acquires an increasingly contextual and strategic character, while self-censorship manifests in forms that vary considerably across digital environments.

The integration of artificial intelligence into processes of content moderation and selection introduces an additional dimension into the configuration of public opinion. Automated moderation systems and algorithmic prioritization mechanisms influence both the visibility of opinions and the boundaries of discursive acceptability, contributing to the formation of normative standards within the digital sphere. Although these mechanisms are ostensibly designed to maintain a safe communicative environment, they may equally produce unintended effects on expression — amplifying self-censorship and reinforcing the dynamics of the *Spiral of Exposure*.

Against this backdrop, the formulation of an integrated theoretical model correlating the *Spiral of Silence*, the *Spiral of Exposure*, and algorithmic public opinion enables a more nuanced understanding of how social pressures, reputational risks, and technological infrastructures jointly shape discursive behavior within the platform society.

The concept of platform society, developed by José van Dijck in collaboration with Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal, is grounded in the premise that digital platforms are not merely technological tools but constitutive infrastructures through which social life is organized. In contemporary society, the relationship with platforms has undergone a qualitative transformation: individuals no longer merely live alongside these systems but, increasingly, within them.

What was once perceived as an open, horizontal, and profoundly democratic space has, over time, given way to an ecosystem dominated by a limited number of major technology companies, among them Google, Meta Platforms, Amazon, and Apple. This concentration is commonly theorized as platformization, a process through which an ever-expanding range of social domains comes to be organized via digital platforms.

An essential aspect emphasized by van Dijck is that platforms are not neutral infrastructures. They operate according to specific logics that shape how individuals act, think, and interact. These underlying logics can be synthesized into four principal dimensions:

- The first is **datafication**, through which online activities are transformed into data that can be collected and economically exploited;
- The second is **commodification**, a process through which social interactions and user-generated content become monetizable resources;
- The third is **algorithmic selection**, whereby algorithms filter and prioritize information, influencing content visibility and perceptions of social reality;
- Finally, **platform governance** refers to the capacity of platforms to establish rules, moderate content, and organize the digital environment, thereby exercising a significant role in regulating online interactions [8].

Whereas the *Spiral of Silence* accounts for discursive withdrawal through the perception of minority status, and the *Spiral of Exposure* emphasizes the pressures associated with visibility and reputational risk, algorithmic public opinion designates the technological framework within which both mechanisms are currently amplified, filtered, and reorganized by the operational logic of digital platforms.

Conclusions

The analysis undertaken demonstrates that the *Spiral of Silence* retains considerable explanatory purchase in accounting for the mechanisms underlying the formation and expression of public opinion. However, its contemporary operation cannot be adequately interpreted in isolation from the structural transformations reshaping the communicative environment. Accelerated digitalization, platform logic, and the algorithmic mediation of visibility together point toward a fundamental reconfiguration of discursive conformity processes, in which the pressure of perceived majority opinion intersects with the technological and reputational dynamics distinctive of the platform society.

A re-examination of the theoretical foundations laid by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann confirms that the *Spiral of Silence* mechanism rests on the interplay between the perception of the climate of public opinion, the fear of social isolation, and the normative pressure exerted by the social environment. From this perspective, the enduring value of the model resides in its capacity to illuminate not only individual silence but also the broader processes through which an apparent consensus is constructed within the public sphere.

Within the context of digital communication, however, these mechanisms are reconfigured by a new constellation of risks associated with public expression. Enhanced visibility, the permanence of digital memory, symbolic sanction, and the reputational economy collectively generate the conditions for the emergence of a *Spiral of Exposure*, one in which self-censorship is driven not only by the fear of marginalization but equally by the risk of public stigmatization and the prospective loss of symbolic capital.

Concurrently, the role of algorithms in filtering and hierarchizing information introduces an additional structural dimension into the configuration of public opinion. Through mechanisms of selection and amplification, digital platforms contribute to the production of algorithmically mediated perceptions of majority

opinion, at times generating illusions of consensus and intensifying the fragmentation of the public sphere.

From a theoretical standpoint, the integration of the *Spiral of Silence*, the *Spiral of Exposure*, and algorithmic public opinion into a unified analytical framework enables the development of an expanded model for interpreting discursive behavior within platform society. This framework brings into relief the extent to which contemporary public expression is simultaneously shaped by socio-psychological dynamics, the reputational logic of digital visibility, and the algorithmic infrastructures that underpin digital platforms.

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Presented: 01.03.2026

Reviewed: 10.03.2026

Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026