A powerful effects theory returns: a study of group pressure and the spiral of silence in the context of broken circles

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Abstract: In the process of development, the new media opinion field has supplemented and summarized some existing theories of communication, in order to improve the adaptability between the original theories and the new phenomenon of communication . Using the theory of the spiral of silence and the theory of social availability, this paper analyses the phenomenon that the degree of opinion pluralism in many public opinionate events, such as Zhu Junxuanzi, has significantly diminished, and thus concludes that the spiral of silence has returned in the new media opinion field. The paper argues that the social availability of new media platforms and the group pressure generated by audiences in them are important reasons for the return of the spiral of silence.

Keywords: Spiral of silence; Group polarization; Social availability

1 Background

The early days of the Internet saw the formation of various online communities and different online groups with more pluralistic expressions of opinions. However, in recent years, in many public opinionate events such as Zhu Jun Xuanzi, the degree of opinion pluralism has significantly diminished, showing the phenomenon of a spiral of unified and silent opinions returning over a period of time, with the Internet users changing their opinions only after a period of time, or even experiencing progressive extremes of opinion. We observed that the extremes of opinion emerged because the Internet users clearly felt group pressure to engage in quasi-sensory statistics, and when they perceived a difference of opinion from their own, they tended to be silent, or to voice mainstream opinions against their will. Those who express a different opinion are, without exception, "flushed". This leads us to wonder why, in spite of the anonymity, users still feel group pressure? What is the psychological mechanism by which this pressure works? In this paper, I examine the phenomenon of opinion homogenisation on the Internet, starting with the theory of the spiral of silence and the theory of social availability.

2 Literature review

2. 1 A literature review of the spiral of silence theory

The spiral of silence theory has received much attention from scholars both nationally and internationally since it was proposed by Lippmann in 1985 (Lippmann, 1985). American scholar Masullo Gina M In the article 'Does online incivility cancel out the spiral of silence? A moderated mediation model of willingness to speak out', from the perspective of the audience's emotional expression, revealshow the spiral of silence effect on traditional media in his article, he reveals the causes and processes of the spiral of silence in traditional media. In the article, he points out that when uncivil messages generate lower emotions, and people are less likely to speak out, regardless of their views. In addition, the limited access to the paper media makes people tend to be silent (Masullo Gina M (2021). Russian scholars Arthur Atanesyan In Communicating COVID-19 on Social Media: The Effects of the Spiral of Silence, a Russian scholar analyses the differential audience response to the communication of major health events on social media. He points out that at the age of new media, where information flows smoothly and easily, most people do not follow the rules of epidemic prevention and deliberately hide their true opinions from officials, which is a reflection of the assimilation of the spiral of silence into the public discourse, despite the rapidity and wide circulation of information. (Arthur Atanesyan, 2021)

In her article "Analysis of the "anti-spiral of silence" phenomenon in the new media environment", domestic scholar Ke Lina analyses the reverse development motive and the operation mechanism of the spiral of silence in the new media environment. She argues that in the new media era, the "anti-spiral of silence" has, on the one hand, effectively prevented the phenomenon of "tyranny of the majority" and maintained the ecological balance of the online society; on the other hand, it has also been used by some irrational minorities, thus promoting the proliferation of extreme speech. She focuses her research on the tension between the "spiral of silence" and the "anti-spiral of silence".

Unfortunately, the above studies do not explore the phenomenon of group polarisation and the spiral of silence in the Internet in terms of how information is generated and disseminated online, and therefore do not answer the question of why users still feel group pressure and the psychological mechanisms at work in the current era of anonymity.

2.2 Literature review on group pressure

The theory of group pressure was proposed in 1950 by Ezrielle and has received a lot of attention from scholars at home and abroad and has produced a lot of research results (Ezrielle, 1950).

The theory of the formation of group pressure has attracted multiple perspectives in the academia, and foreign scholar Samuli Laato in his article'Group polarisation among location-based game players: an analysis of use and attitudes towards game slang'the audience's perspective on group polarisation is described in terms of group pressure in virtual gaming-based communities.

He explores the behavioural patterns and speech patterns of players in the virtual scenarios of games, exploring the influence of group dominant opinions on individual opinions in terms of game slang (SamuliLaato, 2021).

Domestic scholar Huang Changwei in "Sensitive agents under group pressure form fewer opinion clusters", he combined the phenomenon of group pressure on China's online social platforms with people's innate personality, and he found that people who are sensitive by nature are more likely to be infected by group pressure on the Internet, thus influencing their own behaviour (Huang Changwei, 2021). Domestic scholars Jiang Shuyang In the article "Group Polarization Based on Agent Emotional Characteristics and Credibility", an opinion evolution model with Agent Emotional Characteristics and Credibility was constructed based on the Deffuant model to study the evolutionary mechanism of group polarization (Jiang Shuyang, 2021).

However, existing research does not examine the mechanisms by which group pressure operates from a mass communication perspective, and therefore does not answer the question of how group pressure on online platforms leads to the emergence of the spiral of silence.

2.3 Literature review on social availability

After social availability was proposed by the American eco-psychologist Gibson in 1979, it has received much attention from scholars at home and abroad, and more research results have been achieved. (Gibson, 1979)

Foreign Scholar Joseph Kenneth In 'A qualitative, network-centric method for modeling socio-technical systems, with applications to evaluating interventions on social media platforms to increase social equality", adds to the theory of social availability from the perspective of mediating technological change, arguing that the mediated environment of social platforms influences people's speech behaviour. (Joseph Kenneth, 2022)

In the article "Study on the Construction of Mainstream Media Communication Platform from the Perspective of Media Availability Theory: Taking "People's Video" Website and Client as an Example", Zhang Shuqi, a domestic scholar, starts from the perspective of information content production, and studies the content production, media technology and communication terminal of "People's Video" website and client platform availability,through three perspectives: production availability, social availability and communication availability. In the article, we studied the content production, media technology and dissemination terminal of the "People's Video" website and client platform from the perspective of information content production, through the production availability, social availability and dissemination availability, in order to provide reference ideas for the construction of the mainstream media platform.

However, these studies do not examine the impact of audience controllability on social opinion in terms of the development of new media technologies, and therefore do not answer questions about the impact of social controllability on the phenomenon of the return of the spiral of silence.

This paper will therefore attempt to answer the following questions from the perspective of information dissemination on media platforms: What are the reasons for the return of the spiral of silence effect in the social arena of new media platforms? What role does the theory of group

polarisation and social availability play?

3 Research method: In-depth interview method

3.1 Interview outline production

The interview questions were divided into three main sections.

In the first part, the basic information of the interviewees is covered, including age, occupation, education level and location. In the second part, the research questions were downscaled into interview questions. They include Internet users' expression of opinions on the Internet, their perceptions of group polarisation, the composition of their friends on different social networking software and their preference for expressing their opinions. In the third part, the preparation mainly involved questions that might be dug deeper. If respondents had any questions that they did not want to answer or were unhappy during the interview, they could choose to remain silent or withdraw in the middle. Interview materials that the interviewees declared that they did not want to disclose were not included or quoted in this study.

3.2 Selection of interviewees

This study conducted 30-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with each 10 users of online new media platforms aged between 20 and 50 years old. The interviews began on May 12, 2022 and ended on June 1, 2022. The interviewees were sophomore students enrolled in the Department of Literature, and because the author used the Internet medium to conduct conversational interviews, numerous research samples were collected. According to the principle of maximum sampling in qualitative research methods, by the time the tenth interviewee was recruited, all the interviews were sufficient to answer the research questions and the sample collection was closed. The respondents varied in age, occupation, level of education and location, with a low degree of homogeneity.

The interviews were conducted in the form of text interviews on WeChat. The results of the interviews collated into verbatim, interview scripts totalling 7,000 words. The content processing of the interviews was done by two authors. The basic profile of the interviewees is shown in the table below.

Table 1

Age	Occupation	Level of education	Location	
echo	21	Students	University	Beijing
YY	40	Individually owned businesses	Junior High School	Hubei
lami	29	Beauty Salon Owner	Secondary School	Guangxi
vivi	22	Meituan delivery person	Primary Schools	Jilin
jerry	28	Students	PhD	Tibet
caicai	32	Teacher	Masters	Jiangsu
terri	50	Employees of state-owned enterprises	Tertiary	Heilongjiang
CC	54	Restaurant owner	High School	Chengdu
agoni	37	Screenwriter	Masters	Shanghai
bianca	41	Insurance salesman	Tertiary	Hangzhou

4 Research findings and discussion points

When the author conducted further in-depth interviews and tried to obtain answers to the questions of whether they would express their opinions on the Internet and the differences in their circle of friends across media platforms, the results of the study showed that users preferred not to express their opinions in the Internet, but would also express some opinions when they agreed with the mainstream media. The results of the interviews on the composition of the circle of friends across multiple media platforms are consistent with the author's hypothesis.

4.1 The return of the 'spiral of silence' - opinion monoliths and group polarisation

The results of the interviews confirm the return of the "spiral of silence" effect, with the Internet users less willing to express their opinions and form a pluralistic opinion field than before, and a significant reduction in opinion pluralism. A key factor in the reluctance to express one's true thoughts is social group pressure. "I don't really like to express my opinion about something on the Internet, in case I don't speak to someone's heart, it will be awkward to meet them later." Interviewee caicai said. In addition, interviewee cc said, "There are many friends I know on both Weibo and WeChat Jitterbug, so I would be cautious about speaking out for the sake of my acquaintances and friends." Based on their "self-presentation" on social media platforms, users often choose to remain silent in order to maintain an image of the virtual online world versus the real world. These factors also lead to a tendency for opinions to be unified online in many public opinion events, which can eventually lead to the polarisation of opinions under the guidance of opinion leaders.

4.2 Reasons for reduced opinion pluralism - increased social availability of media

In the Webio 2.0 era, a large number of subcultural circles were constructed, but as teenagers gradually became young and entered society and capital continued to expand, various subcultural groups gradually broke the circle, and the social availability of various media platforms was greatly enhanced. Under the influence of capital breaking the circle, various software such as ShakeYin, Weibo, WeChat and Xiaohongshu are all facing the same audience. Many online media platforms are also using computerised big data and algorithms to strengthen the strong relationship between users and enhance the social features of each media platform. Interview subject Agoni said, "Jitterbug always asks you if you want to follow your address book friends and also recommends friends of friends that you might know, I can't turn off this feature yet, it's really distressing, it feels like there is no private space on the Internet anymore." In addition, interviewee echo spoke of how "Weibo is now an enlarged version of WeChat's circle of friends, the people who follow each other are still those I know or friends and family who knows me, and my mother knows everything I say on Weibo." As interviewees said these platforms are set up with basic functions such as following, liking, commenting, private messaging and retweeting, and settings such as address book friends, local tweets and people you may know are also present

and widely used across media platforms. On the other hand, interviewee bianca said, "I add good friends on many media platforms because everyone is active on the Internet nowadays, and if I didn't have friends, it would be troublesome to share some segments, videos and posts, and I would have to copy and paste to save pictures, but with friends on the same platform I can retweet and share with one click. " This shows that audiences generally have accounts on Xiaohongshu, ShakeYin, Weibo and WeChat at the same time. For the sake of convenience, they tend to add similar friends to their accounts on different software, rather than making the social circles of each account distinct, which makes the boundaries between strong and weak relationship platforms increasingly blurred, and the social circles of each platform tend to be similar. In this context, the effect of self-construction and self-representation in the strong relationship platforms is spreading to the weak relationship platforms.

On a psychological level, interviewee YY said: "I'm definitely influenced by the people around me, for example, when I want to express my opinion, I definitely look at what opinions people agree with online first", which suggests that users still perform quasi-sensory statistics to understand the mainstream opinions in hot comments and choose to speak supportively or silently, thus ensure that their online and real image construction can remain unified, all of which can lead to the return of the powerful effects theory. However, the author also notes that not all users are mindful of social group pressure and that there are still people who express dissenting opinions. Interview subject lami stated, "I will express my opinions, but it's usually the small Weibo number, ah, I don't usually express anything on my big number, but I still have a lot of positive and negative opinions on my small number, but I do it very carefully, my small number doesn't even follow my big number." Expressions like that of interviewee lami are often not due to resisting group pressure, because the social groups are clearly divided between the different accounts, providing a relatively safe and private space for themselves, but such users still make up a minority.

5 Summary and Reflection

This study uses a questionnaire to examine the return of the spiral of silence and the phenomenon of group polarisation, and through the study of many public opinion events such as Zhu Jun Xuanzi, to answer the question: "Why do users still feel group pressure in the present time of anonymity? What is the psychological mechanism of this stress action?" The question. The study found that the hypothesis that group pressure occurs due to the blurring of social boundaries between strong and weak media platforms and that the psychological mechanism of this pressure is a regression of the spiral of silence theory is valid.

This study proposes a theory of social availability to explain the reasons for the diminished plurality of opinion on online media platforms. On the other hand, it also provides a theoretical basis for the social dimension of the return of the spiral of silence in the context of information dissemination in modern China.

In addition, the study also finds that the continuous development of Internet media platforms has led to the blurring of boundaries between media and the increasing tendency to make the

private sphere public, which has intensified group pressure and the tendency of users to be silent on the Internet, ultimately leading to the growing phenomenon of group polarisation; and Internet users, in order to maintain their "front" good image, and tend to hide their true thoughts and feelings, thus leading to a powerful return of the spiral of silence effect. In order to maintain their "front" image, netizens tend to hide their true thoughts and feelings, thus leading to a powerful return of the spiral of silence effect.

However, this study also has shortcomings such as an imbalanced ratio of men to women, incomplete social division of people, and a small gap in the age of dimension due to the interview method and the size of the population. In future studies, researchers in the field of online group discourse may want to conduct specific and individualised surveys for people of different ages, genders and social divisions in order to expand their research on online group discourse.

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