



*The Spiral of silence approach between the reality of the death of theory and
its Applicability:
Analytical study in light of the Algerian Virtual Communication Context*

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Abstract:

This research aims to critically assess the validity of the Spiral of Silence Theory Developed by German researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, in the context of contemporary virtual communication. Specifically, it investigates whether the theory continues to hold relevance, or if current dynamics reveal instances of its mechanisms being challenged or violated? While researchers in Algeria have previously addressed this subject, this study diverges through its methodological approach and analytical lens. It aims to apply the hypotheses of the Spiral of Silence theory to the unique realities of the Algerian communication landscape, bolstered by empirical examples.

Keywords: The spiral of silence; Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann; theory; communication context; virtual reality; violation.

I. INTRODUCTION

At a time when the media was one of the main contributors to shaping public opinion within the framework of a dual equation in which the prevailing opinion is the opinion of the majority at the expense of the opposing group, which preferred to remain silent and not share their opinions fearing social isolation, which is the main assumption on which the perspective of the "spiral of silence" by Elisabeth Noelle - Neumann who was interested in studying the role of the media in shaping public opinion.

Neumann noted that when the media builds general images of issues and moves public awareness to care about them, it simultaneously pressures those who do not agree with the images of opinion or general consensus expressed through these means, so that they tend to hide their opinions and not express them, and prefer to remain silent and hide their points of view from the feeling of their difference and isolation from others (Kabour, 2010, p. 74), which contributes to strengthening the prevailing opinion, although it may not represent public opinion as a whole.

However, the reality of the modern communication context, with its variables and new actors in the making and mobilising of opinion, including the category of individuals that researcher Newman referred to, who, according to her, were silent if they found that their personal opinions did not align with those of the prevailing majority in society or with those endorsed and promoted by traditional media, indicates that changes have occurred. It is noticeable that thanks to the communication applications that this environment has provided with almost equal opportunities for all segments of society, we find that the silent category that the "spiral of silence" theory spoke about has broken its silence, adopting virtual platforms provided by the Internet as a platform to convey its opinions and discuss them with others, which has created a breach in the "spiral of silence."

Based on the above, the concern of studying the validity of the hypotheses of the "Spiral of Silence" theory has been crystallized. Also, monitoring the manifestations of its projection and applications on the reality of public opinion-making within the context of the current digital environment variables is targeted to determine the extent of its continuity or penetration, taking models from the Algerian communication context as examples.

In this regard, the study notes that the theory under review in this research paper has been addressed by Algerian researchers, but despite the similarity between them, it differs in terms of the approach and points of view.

1. Conceptual foundation of the "Spiral of Silence" theory:

1.1 The origin of the theory:

The "Spiral of Silence" theory, or as it is called "spiral" or "gate" or "reinforcement of silence", is one of the theories that focused on monitoring the effects of the media on society. The credit for developing it goes to the German researcher "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann" during the seventies of the last century, specifically in 1974 (Hamid, 2015, p. 425).

Where "Neumann" was interested in studying the role of the media in influencing public opinion in the long term, especially in political and electoral campaigns (Achyut, 2014, pp. 2-4), and worked on tracking the political opinions of voters during these campaigns, specifically during political elections in Germany (El-Abdi, 2023, p. 380).

The theory assumes the existence of a strong correlation between two basic variables: the media and the content it broadcasts, and the orientation, inclinations, and beliefs of the masses (Nasr R. , 2018) (Nasr, 2018). Newman noted that when the media builds general images of

issues and moves public awareness to care about them, it simultaneously pressures those who do not agree with it so that they tend to remain silent and hide their points of view fearing isolation (Kabour, 2010, p. 74).

Neumann focused on three basic concepts in the "Silence Model" from a social perspective (El-Abdi, 2023, p. 381):

A- Fear of isolation: The individual lives in a society and interacts with the public opinion environment in it, which is shaped by several factors and variables, including the media. Therefore, the individual tends to form his opinion according to the prevailing public opinion in his society. In other words, it can be said that the individual does not announce his true opinion, but rather prefers to keep it and not disclose it to others if he feels that the majority of individuals have an opinion contrary to his opinion.

The "Spiral of Silence" theory explains this phenomenon in light of the individual's fear of isolation from others if he expresses an opinion contrary to the majority opinion (without author, Theories of Strong Influence, 2019, p. 6), individuals' fear of social isolation makes them follow the majority in an attempt to unite with them, even if it is at the expense of hiding their opinions and not disclosing them.

B- Opinion climate: It refers to the distribution of opinions in the individual's environment, including the current distribution of opinions and the potential distribution of opinions in the future.

C- Monitoring and measurement: It refers to the ability of individuals to monitor the social environment, perceive and evaluate existing opinions and decide whether their behavior will be accepted or opposed by the majority of individuals.

According to the theory of the "spiral of silence", people who believe that they hold minority views tend to remain silent and not express their opinions, while those whose opinions are in line with the majority tend to express their opinions with ease. In various issues, the individual finds himself facing two sides, either with the majority or with the minority. If individual discovers that his opinion is in line with the majority opinion, his self-confidence increases and he is able to express himself strongly without fear of isolation. However, if he discovers that the opinion he holds does not agree with the majority opinion, his self-confidence and desire to express this opinion decrease greatly and he remains silent. The desire or tendency of the individual to speak and express his opinion and the tendency of another individual to remain silent take the form of a spiral process that ends with confirming the superiority of one opinion over another (Nasr H. M., 2005, p. 11).

1.2 Theory content:

The "spiral of silence" theory views the media as a contributing factor in the process of shaping and forming public opinion, with the pressures it provides on people that make them respond to its opinion with acceptance and acquiescence or silence (Nasr H. M., 2005, p. 11). This theory is based on the observation that the media is the primary producer of public opinion. If an individual sees that he does not receive support in expressing his opinions and positions from his immediate environment or the media, he resorts to silence and withdrawal from public discussions. The stage following this process is that those who share the dominant opinion speak more and more, which makes the dominant opinion clear, while the rest of the opinions (even if they are many) hide behind deep silence. According to this model, the media has the ability to direct individuals not in how they should think or what they should think about, but in what they should not think about for fear of isolation (Temar, 2005, p. 87).

Individuals tend to form their opinions based on the dominating public opinion in their society. However, those who oppose this trend or opinion adopt a position of silence to avoid persecution by the group and fear social isolation. Consequently, if they hold opinions that differ from those presented by the media and communications, they withhold their personal opinions and refrain from participating in the conversation. Hence, silence is an expression of rejection, not acceptance. This is what is called latent public opinion (Nasr R. , 2018).

Whenever the media works to spread and promote the prevailing or dominant viewpoints in public opinion, the minority that opposes this prevailing viewpoint remains silent, which confirms the belief in the unlimited influence of the media and supports the claim of its power, because the minority's commitment to silence for fear of isolation does not occur due to the influence of selective perception, but rather as a result of the power of the media in imposing the dominance of the prevailing viewpoint.

The tendency of some to speak forcefully and others to prefer silence sets in motion a "spiral process" that progressively reinforces the viewpoint of whoever succeeds in controlling, as the individual, in the process of generating the "spiral of silence," comes to believe what he thinks others believe. The "spiral" indicates a shift in opinion that appears through a group appearing stronger than it is, while those who adopt the opposing viewpoint appear weaker than they are (Kabour, 2010, p. 74).

2. Theoretical assumptions and the basic controlling variables:

2.1 Assumptions of the Spiral of Silence Theory:

The "Sphere of Silence" theory assumes a strong correlation between two basic variables: the media and the content it broadcasts, and the public's orientations, tendencies, and beliefs. The theory presents a set of basic hypotheses that explain the behaviour of individual's in expressing their opinions in light of the fear of social isolation.

The "Sphere of Silence" theory is based on the basic premise that "most people are naturally afraid of isolation. This fear causes them to follow the majority in an attempt to unite with them, even if it means concealing their opinions or viewpoints that differ from those of the majority, thus remaining silent about them. This silence will become increasingly adhered to as the media increasingly supports and publicizes the views of the majority. Consequently, the silent minority will prefer to remain silent rather than feel isolated from others who represent the majority of the opinions prevalent in the media (Hamid, 2015, p. 426).

The majority of individuals, fearing rejection and unpopularity, try to conform to the opinions of others and follow the majority view, which is usually consistent with the ideas supported by the media. Therefore, these media play a prominent role in shaping public opinion because they are considered a reference source for informing the public (Ben Ammar , 2015, p. 222).

This main hypothesis is divided into a set of secondary hypotheses:

First: When the media adopts certain opinions, ideas, or trends over a period of time, most individuals (the public) will move in the direction supported by the media, and thus public opinion will be formed in a manner consistent with the ideas supported by those media (Marabet , 2018, pp. 514-515).

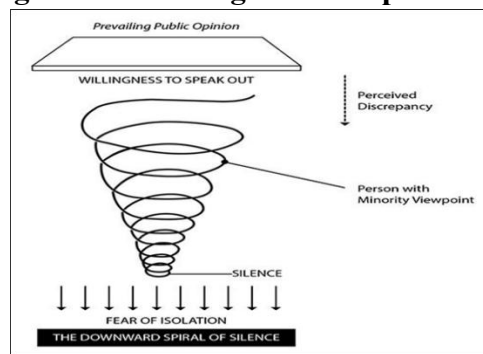
When the media and mass communication address an issue or a person, this leads to the majority of the public supporting the direction adopted by these media in search of social consensus. As for the individuals who oppose this issue or that person, they adopt a position of silence to avoid persecution by the large group of supporters or for fear of social isolation (Leo

W, Kimberly. , & Neuendorf & David Atki, 2010, p. 115). This may cause pressure on those who disagree with the opinion adopted by these media, so they resort to silence, which leads to obtaining a “spiral” effect that increasingly leans towards the prevailing side adopted by the media, regardless of the real position of the public (Without authors, 2012).

Second: The individual's pursuit of societal acceptance and fear of isolation from society prevents him from expressing opinions. Newman says: "Most people fear isolation, and this fear drives them to follow the majority in an attempt to unite with them, even if this silence increases when the media reinforces the majority's views" (Marabet , 2018, pp. 514-515). Individuals ignore their own views and cling to the group's viewpoints, fearing isolation. The more the media reinforces the dominant opinions, the more the minority's views disappear.

The following diagram illustrates how the "spiral of silence theory" works:

Figure (1): A diagram illustrating how the spiral of silence is formed



The source :(Achyut, 2014, p. 4)

Comment: When the majority of individuals believe that the side supported by the media represents the prevailing public opinion in society, the view espoused by the media continues to grow stronger, potentially putting greater pressure on individuals with a minority viewpoint. These individuals often resort to silence in search of social conformity and fear of social isolation. This creates a spiral effect that increasingly favours the prevailing viewpoint espoused by the media, regardless of the public's actual position.

2.2 Variables of the media's influence on shaping the spiral of silence:

Newman identified three key variables that contribute and increase the power of the media's influence in shaping the spiral of silence:

- Quantitative influence through repetition: When the media presents similar and repeated media messages about a specific issue, topic, or figure, this cumulative presentation leads to a long-term impact on the recipient (Marabet , 2018, p. 514).

- Popularity and dissemination: The media is a source of information wherever we are (Hamid, 2015, p. 428).

- Harmony and compatibility between media professionals and their institutions: This means that those in charge of communication and those working in the media community present their media messages in harmony with the position of the owners of the media institutions in which they work, which in turn are in harmony with those with major interests in directing public opinion to the public. this leads to similarity in their orientations and similarity in the ethical logic of the media work they carry out, and this leads to similarity in the media messages transmitted by various media outlets, which increases the strength of their impact on the recipients (Marabet , 2018, p. 514).

All of these factors, as Elizabeth Newman sees it, reduce the recipient's opportunity to

form an independent opinion on the raised issues, thereby increasing the media's ability to shape ideas and trends that influence public opinion.

3. Criticisms of the "Sphere of Silence" Theory and Responses to Them:

3.1 Criticism of the "Sphere of Silence" Theory:

"Sphere of Silence" Theory assumes that the media has a powerful influence, and that the audience is powerless. When a media outlet broadcasts a message to the audience, it must have a direct impact on attitudes, opinions, and ideas, and consequently on the behaviours that express these attitudes and opinions. This ignores the factors of selective perception and influence of the recipient, who, from the perspective of the "Sphere of Silence" Theory, is considered a passive audience whose role is limited to receiving and responding to the messages they receive from the media and being influenced by them. Their role ends there. However, it is noteworthy that the "spiral of silence" approach sees that this effect is the result of the individual's desire not to be isolated from the society in which he lives, and also the result of his desire to be on the side of the majority. The individual receiving the "spiral of silence" approach, from the perspective of the "spiral of silence" theory, tends to remain silent regarding what he does not realize from the media, whether it is true or not (Without authors, 2012).

The above has been taken as an intellectual starting point for several criticisms of the "spiral of silence" theory, which are summarised in the following points (Shawi, 2010):

1. Individuals' silence is not necessarily due to fear of social isolation but rather is the result of individuals' lack of sufficient information about the issue under discussion, or their complete ignorance of it.
2. Doubt about the assumption of repetition, the dominance of the media in shaping public opinion, and the homogeneity of this role.
3. The media does not necessarily reflect the majority opinion it promotes.
4. It is difficult to explain public opinion and its formation in isolation from the role of information and experiences that individuals acquire through the surrounding political and social environment, as the "spiral of silence" theory neglects the influence of the political and social environment (reference groups) in shaping public opinion.
5. Lack of empirical validity, as some field studies have proven that the concept of the silent minority lacks precision and cannot be generalized (Ben Ammar , 2015, p. 223).

Some have added the following criticisms (without author, Theories of Strong Influence, 2019, p. 10):

6. The spiral of silence theory emphasizes the idea of "audience passivity," in contrast to many theories that emphasize audience positivity and activity. The spiral of silence theory does not provide strong evidence of the media's ability to overcome audience selective processes.
7. In explaining minority silence, the theory focuses on the fear of social isolation as a motivation, while failing to mention other motives that may play a role, such as the influence of the solidarity and mutual support of the group to which the individual belongs, and the individual's need.

3.2 Responding to Criticisms:

Newman responded to the criticisms directed at the theory she developed (the spiral of silence theory), acknowledging the validity of some of them and rejecting the rest, as follows (without author, Theories of Strong Influence, 2019, p. 11):

- Newman acknowledged that there is a minority within the silent minority group who adhere to their opinions, and these individuals may express their views if they are influenced by others.

- In response to the lack of consistency in content, Newman acknowledged this in Western societies and emphasized that it applies to developing countries.

- Newman retracted the assumption that the media reflects the prevailing trend in society or the majority opinion, and distinguished between real public opinion and the false public opinion that the media may present.

4. Applying the "spiral of silence" hypothesis to the virtual communication context (Algeria as a case study):

4.1 A reading of the reality of the theory's applications to the Algerian virtual communication context:

This section will discuss the manifestations of the projections or applications of the "spiral of silence" theory to the current communication context which is characterized by the dominance of the use of digital communication tools and virtual spaces as its domains, in various societies, including Algerian society. This will be done in an attempt to answer the main question of the study: Is the spiral of silence theory no longer valid, and therefore has it disappeared and vanished? Or is it still valid and relevant, with new variables recorded in its application mechanisms?

Based on our critical reading and recorded observations based on the reality of the virtual communication context in Algeria, the study was able to record several observations regarding the validity of the "spiral of silence" hypothesis. The results were as follows:

- The silent group discussed in the theory prefer to remain silent if they find that the opinions and ideas they hold conflict with the prevailing majority opinion in their environment and with the opinions promoted by the media. This is due to the fear of being isolated from the group, being subjected to legal accountability, or being persecuted by others. This leads to the discussion of breaking the spiral of silence and breaking the barrier of silence. This is thanks to the applications, features, and characteristics provided by the modern virtual communication context, which allow individuals to express their opinions after being kept to themselves previously and not expressing them or sharing them with others. The new digital environment, with its various platforms and media, has contributed to changing the pattern of production and distribution of information content, which is now transmitted "from everyone to everyone" (Al-Raji, 2018).

The current Algerian virtual context which is characterized by granting individuals and users of social media applications and platforms the freedom to publish and express their opinions and views on prevailing issues and events in various fields: political, economic, religious, cultural, or specific personalities, with complete freedom and without restrictions or fear of consequences. Based on our observations of the communication process and the current Algerian virtual context, it is noted that these applications and platforms have become a means for individuals to convey their voice (internal and unspoken), convey their concerns, and present the problems that hinder their lives, documented in audio, image, and video. These applications, after being published in cyberspace within a short period of time, receive numerous reactions from other users, which may transform them into a public opinion issue and move the authorities, who are forced to take the necessary legal measures against them and find solutions for them. This results in overcoming the duality of the main assumption upon

which the theory of "the spiral of silence" is based. These virtual communication spaces have become a means for individuals to escape the isolation assumed by the "spiral of silence" theory, when the majority prevails in presenting an idea or opinion at the expense of another opinion whose members may constitute the majority but remain silent. The modern communication context has mitigated this isolation, allowing the opinions of the silent minority to be announced and expressed. Among the mechanisms for breaking the spiral of silence that were monitored:

A- Creating virtual spaces in the form of discussion groups:

It has been noted that with the use of social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and others, every individual, including members of the silent group referred to by the "spiral of silence theory," no longer hides their opinions by remaining silent or representing the majority. Rather, they express and discuss them, whether with those who agree with them or with those who disagree. This is achieved by creating their own spaces on these virtual communication platforms. These groups may share a common job, education, activity, hobby, or economic and political interests. These groups come together and adopt unified positions and orientations that take on a virtual organization. This can be used to implement shared behaviour or a preliminary agreement on a specific activity, thus forming a pressure "lobby" that contributes to imposing its power and influence not only on the virtual level but also extends to the real world.

In the digital age, the process of influence is now measured by the extent of the growing presence on virtual social networking platforms. Many discussion groups are spreading across virtual communication applications, bringing together Algerian users who share certain interests and use these platforms as a space to express their opinions and criticisms of reality, even if they differ from the image portrayed in the media.

The case of the young man "Ayachi Mahjoubi," or as he was called "the man of the well," is an example which constituted one of the most important events circulated on social media during December 2018. Facebook provided Algerians, political actors, and human rights activists with an opportunity to disseminate their opinions, ideas, and criticisms, to the point that it became a pressure force that changed public opinion, leading to the dismissal of the governor of M'sila, "Hajj Mokdad," due to his mishandling of this crisis (for more details, see: Qarti, "Citizens Rise Against the Governor of M'sila Because of Ayachi!", 2018).

The "Algerian Hirak" movement also represented another example of the voice of the silent majority of Algerians, who had suffered from exclusion, marginalization, and harsh living conditions for years. They were unable to express their discontent with these poor conditions. Virtual communication platforms provided a launching pad for expressing their opinions, resulting in several reforms in response to the demands of the Algerian street and people.

B- Live Broadcasting Feature:

Social media applications have become a space for publishing and broadcasting live the various events that individuals experience. They are also a means for conveying their concerns and presenting the problems that hinder their lives, documented in audio, video, and image. These applications, after being published, receive numerous reactions from other users, potentially transforming them into a public opinion issue. Thanks to video technology, which is available to all mobile phone owners, they have become a mobile cinema, conveying the details of daily events and documenting, in audio and video, numerous situations and violations on the streets, roads, and in open and closed spaces. These videos arouse public opinion and motivate authorities, who are forced to take the necessary legal measures (Zardan , 2018).

They also enable the shift from personal protest to directing public opinion and mobilizing through groups or pages on social media applications (Maatouq , 2017).

C- Hashtags and Tweets:

They are symbols of (#) followed by a word, slogan, influential phrase, or number, which expresses a position and invites people to join and participate in spreading it widely (without author, Everything You Want to Know About Hashtags and Their Uses on Social Media Platforms, 2024). This is considered a form of expressing opinions that were previously unpublishable and were kept silent. Examples of hashtags sweeping social media sites are those in support of a cause or those that call on Algerians to boycott, such as the call to boycott certain products and beverages in support of the Palestinian cause.

D- Comment:

This is when an individual expresses their opinion by writing a comment on a specific piece of news or event as a form of expressing their opinion and position on it, whether by responding to posts by writing (text), posting photos and videos, liking or not, or using memes and emoji's. They can also be reposted on their account or in other virtual groups.

E- The transformation of topics published by users of virtual communication applications to topics included in the agenda of traditional media:

While the media was the one that determined the important topics that the public discussed in the public space, today social networking sites and applications have become among the main actors that frame the importance of the topics that the media must address and present to public opinion. What users on Facebook, for example (who were previously silent), and the importance that the public attaches to these contents in this cyberspace, has become a necessity for traditional media to address and discuss these topics (Ben Ammar , 2015, p. 225).

On the other hand, the circle of discussion around these topics does not remain confined to those with the ability to communicate electronically. Rather, these ideas are being transmitted to the street and circulated in discussions by those who do not communicate electronically (Ben Youssef , 2017, p. 222), confirming the role played by social media in shaping public opinion in the current digital communications context.

Indeed, many traditional Algerian media outlets rely on Facebook platforms as a source of information, employing them to address current topics and events, which they discuss on their programs, particularly television channels. This has prompted these outlets, in their desire to keep pace with events and join the ranks of the electronic news industry, to allocate email addresses for audience members to send videos or photos taken with their smartphones, whether documenting a specific problem or event or conveying their concerns and daily life issues. These are then displayed to viewers and, in many cases, transformed into topics for discussion, after a process of scrutiny and verification of their authenticity. In summary, and based on our personal readings, it is clear that the outcomes of the modern digital communication context have influenced and altered the balance of public opinion by reshaping it, opening the way for the silent group to participate in shaping it, compared to traditional media outlets, as postulated by the "spiral of silence" theory. The silent group's ability to overcome its fear of isolation and express its opinions, viewpoints, and concerns within the modern virtual communication context is reinforced by a number of indicators—in our view—including:

1. The ability to conceal one's true identity, which boosts self-confidence and enables one to express one's opinions with complete candour.

2. The ease of widespread publication from anywhere and at any time thanks to the Internet. Publishing on virtual social media platforms requires only a few basic skills, such as having an account on the platform and mastering the methods of publishing on it.

3. The low cost of publishing.

4- Increasing the number of users of virtual communication platforms across different age and social groups. According to the “DIGITAL” report issued in January 2024 by Datareportal, a company specializing in statistics related to fixed and mobile internet worldwide, the use of the internet and social media in Algeria has increased, as the number of internet users reached 33.49 million users, representing a connection rate of 72.9%. This means that about 3 out of every 4 Algerians are connected to the internet. Social media users in Algeria also witnessed an increase compared to 2023 (without author, A Report on the Most Used Digital Platforms in Algeria, 2024): 11.40 million users on the “Instagram” platform, while the number of users of the “YouTube” platform reached 22.80 million compared to 22.70 million users last year. The number of users of the “Messenger” application reached about 16.40 million users, while the number of users of the “LinkedIn” network reached 3.90 million users. Snapchat has 7.88 million users, and Twitter, or the X platform, surpassed the one million user mark for the second year in a row with 1.24 million users, up from 1.15 million users last year. TikTok has also recorded 17.42 million users, while Mark remains the most widely used social media network in Algeria as of January 2024.

4.2 Discussion:

It must be noted that, given the growing role of virtual applications in influencing public opinion, some violations have been recorded in their use to express the opinions of the silent minority. These violations include falsification of facts, spreading rumours, undermining the religious and social values of society, undermining public security, bullying, the exchange of insults and even threats, and other violations.

This has prompted bodies and authorities to enact laws to reduce their effectiveness, or, to put it more accurately, to codify them by creating legal and legislative mechanisms to limit and restrict their use. This may push social groups to remain silent, not out of fear of social isolation, but rather out of legal deterrence, because their opinions are negative, do not serve society, and lead to their disintegration. We believe this legal deterrence was necessary, as many individuals misuse social media applications and platforms, resulting in numerous violations and cybercrimes. This, in our view, requires regulating the use of virtual communication tools and spaces to truly serve as a platform for expressing unspoken opinions in the public interest.

We also find that many communication applications available in virtual communication contexts rely on the feature of restricting certain posts from minorities, especially if they conflict with their privacy policies. This is particularly true if users announce and report a problem, which may be due to the publication of offensive content—in their view—or to pages or individuals who have shared their posts on social media applications such as Facebook. The site's administration reviews these reports and takes the necessary measures to remove the offensive content and ban its publication. It also bans publishers from publishing any posts for a specified period of time.

This restriction on posting on virtual communication applications may be appropriate to prevent the dissemination of offensive content by individuals—who may constitute a silent

minority in society but, thanks to the anonymity feature, dare to express their opinions, which may be destructive—that may include profanity, insults, and slurs, or incite violence and discrimination between minorities or religions, or may pose a threat to public safety. However, on the other hand, this restriction may serve as a mechanism to silence the voice of the minority and prevent it from being heard.

II. Study Results :

Based on the above presentation and critical analytical reading of the reality of the validity of applying the Spiral of Silence Theory in the virtual communication context (Algeria as a case study), we can draw several conclusions as follows:

-From our perspective, we cannot speak of the death of the "Sphere of Silence Theory" or its unsuitability for studying the formation of public opinion in the virtual communication context. Although this context, with its virtual communication spaces and the shift in the theoretical assumptions it has caused, provides individuals with outlets and means to escape the isolation assumed by the "Sphere of Silence" theory, when the majority prevails in presenting an idea or opinion at the expense of another opinion, whose members may constitute the majority but remain silent, the virtual communication context has mitigated this isolation because it has allowed the silent minority to voice and express its opinion.

- In contrast, we conclude that the virtual communication context, in turn, presents a new approach to silence, which is formed as a result of the virtual communication process and its determinants: "digital silence." Before an individual takes—most of the time—a specific position on an issue or opinion about what has been circulated, whether through the media or via virtual space platforms, whether by supporting it, declaring an opposing opinion, or preferring to remain silent, they evaluate those opinions, note the extent of support or opposition to them, and assess the results and consequences of expressing different opinions. This is especially true given that legislation has been enacted to regulate the use of virtual communication platforms to avoid the spread of violations and cybercrimes that may be caused by the opinions of the silent minority, which may harbour ideas and opinions that violate societal values and principles. This could result in legal penalties against them, which, from our perspective, is a motive for remaining silent.

III. Conclusion:

The modern communication context, characterized by the growing use of virtual communication applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and even YouTube and TikTok, as well as the live broadcasting feature available through these platforms, has provided a space for users to express their opinions, which were previously silent for fear of isolation or persecution. This has transformed them into actors capable of influencing and shaping public opinion.

This entails transcending the duality of the main premise underlying the "spiral of silence" theory. However, given the growing role of these virtual applications in influencing public opinion and the record of some transgressions in their use to express the opinions of the silent minority, such as violations of individual privacy, falsification of facts, bullying, racial discrimination, the exchange of insults and even threats, this has prompted agencies and authorities to enact laws to regulate their use. This involves considering legal mechanisms to restrict their use. This suggests proposing another vision that emphasizes the continuation of the spiral of silence within the virtual communication context.

Regardless of the degree of representation of majority and minority views in public spaces, there remains a cycle of silence to some extent. Some people raise their voices to express their opinions, while others remain silent for fear of dissent and isolation. This opens up horizons for studying laws regulating freedom of expression in cyberspace in the future, with their positive and negative repercussions on the fear of isolation that generates silence among individuals and prevents them from expressing their opinions.

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