

## **Can Social Media, As A Communication Tool, Bring The End Of The Spiral Of Silence?\***

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**Abstract:** *In the 20th century with the invention of computer technology and the internet, communication revolution gained momentum and it is continuing to accelerate further in the 21st century. These rapid technological developments are forcing a change in society at the same rate. Especially in recent years, as one of the important changes of the communication field, social media has become one of the most effective tools of the internet. Without taking into consideration whether their ideas are the prevailing ones or the minority ones, people have begun to share every idea, so they can create their own public in a very short time and as a result they have the opportunity to announce their ideas to whole world. Social media is an important place in the lives of many people, for some it may even be at the addiction levels. With steadily growth of this created communication area of social networks, it has been questioned whether the spiral of silence as introduced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann is still there today. In this study, the facilities offered to individuals by social media as a communication tool, social media as a communication strategy, the spiral of silence in terms of social communication and the impact of social media on spiral of silence will be discussed.*

**Key Words:** *communication, communication tool, social media, spiral of silence*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

From the implementation of the postal service in the 6th century BC until today, communication and media have changed quite largely. Since then about two thousand five hundred years have passed and especially in the last 30 years by changing the form, communication has turned into something digital and mass.

Indeed, internet is the fastest developing media of all times, it developed so rapidly that it reached to 2.5 billion users in 2014, starting from only 16 million users worldwide in 1995, to more than 888 million users as of March 2005 (Global Digital Statistics 2014).

To understand communication and the developments of today's technology, hence to be able to interpret the social change, Neil Postman divides communication into four stages. The first stage is finding of the writing in the 4th century BC. The second stage is the widespread use of the printing press in the 15th century and the third stage is the invention of mass media like television, radio in the 19th century. Neil Postman includes the development of computer technology and the invention of the internet of the 20th century in the concept as the latest revolution. Of course, every revolution has affected their community and has changed more than expected. According to Postman, with the invention of internet, communication revolution that we have witnessed in the 20th century is changing societies at an astonishing rate (Postman, 1994:91).

Instead of the usually defined expression of 21st century society, that is 'communication society', Postman (1994:85) says that they should be defined as 'communication-saturated society', and argues that we have reached to the saturation of information nowadays. Societies don't have difficulties in accessing information but in accessing the right information. Indeed, each individual has the chance to reach the same information with others at the same time, but whether this information is right should be discussed.

Today, though social media is the biggest challenge that security services are facing, it is a rising internet tool. It's been creating a huge impact in influencing our society nowadays. Because now other than the media and politics there is another means of determining the agenda, it is the social media area; Twitter, Facebook, Google + etc. Now that we are in a new age and despite so many advanced communication facilities at this age, does the spiral of silence still exist?

Present literature shows that cyberspace provides a place where all people have the possibility to share their ideas and opinions. By using online communities people with similar ideas can connect with each other and share their ideas freely without any limitations. All kinds of views – from the common, ordinary views to the more rare, obscure, and even strange views can be easily and freely expressed. Everyone can find someone online who thinks like them. Thanks to social networks that you can share your content in your mind every

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moment without depending on the environment, space or time if you have an internet connection. Today it seems that the end of the spiral of silence is coming as a result of new ways of communication technologies.

There is no doubt that social media has had a profound impact on mass communication around the world and continues to create. With each passing day, new social networks, blogs are beginning to broadcast, on the other hand in recent years many magazines, TV channels, the newspapers have been closed. It is obvious that social media has influenced mass media and the face of the media began to change (Baytar, 2013:305). The recent developments in the information world today, especially, with the coming of social media and new media forms, may be as important as any of other inventions. That's why we had better inspect and adapt our information strategies in order not to be out of date.

### **1. Facilities Offered by Social Media as a Communication Tool:**

“Weber thought that the bureaucracies and the markets more than other structures shape the modern society. Had he lived today he might have added the mass media as a third co-author of our destiny. There are many reasons to include the media among the dominant institutions.” (Zetterberg, 1997:52)

Nowadays, blogs, Facebook, Friendfeed, Youtube and other social networks, forums, even the comment fields of news sites, are all called as social media platforms. When communicating on these platforms, you need to leave aside a lot of things that you know about traditional communication. The users are components of social networks and user-generated content form the foundation of social media. All these are changing the way that information is passed across societies and around the world.

As in every tool, there are also disadvantages of social media. On one hand falling cost of communication, on the other hand safety activities can be damaged. In fact, social media can turn into an intelligence gathering tool very easily. For example, Facebook profiles for government intelligence is almost grace. Like in Egypt, social media addiction can be exploited by a regime that wants to cut off the country from the internet or from domestic messaging service. Governments not only follow the protesters' web site, but also they may close the web site. In some countries like Iran and China, such situations can possibly occur during the times of social unrest. For example, in June 2009, the Chinese government has blocked all internet access in the center of ethnic Uighur riots in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

Internet do not only recover people from the psychological barrier; but also allows them to develop on inter-related / unrelated, innumerable conversations / correspondence / interview / sharing / discussion of the multiple and extensive grounds. Unlike traditional media which restricts 'Participation' reflex in different sizes willingly or unwillingly, internet which is not a place to ask questions like: Who is responsible? Who is not? And what to do about official part? Thus internet users have very wide freedom and massive resources of every kind of knowledge. People who are able to meet on a common ground can implement their projects on the Internet. A combination of different and close opinions to each other can be found on the Internet.

The most important and powerful social media using example is Barack Obama's presidential elections in America, because he used a combination of social networking and social media in his campaign. In addition, especially using the social networking such as Twitter, Friendfeed and Facebook, dozens of companies manage to obtain financial gain and these examples show the power and importance of social media (Büyükşener, 2009:19).

The number of users of social networks around the world reveals the power of social media. As in the world Facebook has become a craze in Turkey, and it has 1184 million users in the world while in Turkey it has 36 million users in January 2014 (Global Digital Statistics, 2014).

On Twitter everyone can talk about everything in the most comfortable way and no one is silent and everyone can explain their opinions freely. And most importantly, a dominant side may be created in a very short time. In short, if your followers are plentiful on a particular subject, you can see the desired subject in trending topics and you can allow others to see it. Here, the negative side is there is an uncontrolled environment.

The internet tools, especially social media and new media are altering the way information flow around the world. Today we get information faster and more transparent, moreover the roles of traditional and new media are changing, and social networking tools allow collaboration as never seen before.

All in all, it seems that the internet can help individuals counteract the spiral of silence effect and encourage them express their personal opinions freely.

### **2. Social Media as a Communication Strategy:**

Nowadays not only people but also governmental organizations are using social media as a way of strategic communication. Many government websites have official social media accounts. They use these social media accounts to reach especially to targeted audience.

If people are using social media actively in a society, social networks can offer many possibilities for the intelligence services of other countries. Department of States may efficiently use social networks to find

more information about the targeted societies. It is known that U.S. Embassies in many nations are using social media tools in many parts of the world to get insight information about those societies and foresee the future public events. ([www.intelink.gov/communities/state/smp](http://www.intelink.gov/communities/state/smp) accessed on 20 April 2014).

In Egypt and Tunisia, to organize civil disobedience campaigns and street actions social networks like Facebook and Twitter have been used increasingly. "Green Revolution", taken place in Iran in 2009, was closely monitored by western media via YouTube and Twitter. Social media were not easily contained. Although all the measures were taken by the Iranian government, the images of the protests and reports of the government's abuses continued to leak to the Internet. Another example; the 2009 revolution in Moldova was called as "Twitter Revolution"

However, it should be accepted that social media alone cannot bring a revolution. Revolution is much more than we see and hear on the Internet. For the revolution you need organization, financial support and the ability to mobilize the masses. Social media has undoubted advantages in terms of spreading its messages to the masses quickly; but at the same time social media tactics are vulnerable to anti-government protests. Social media is a tool which helps to reduce the costs of the participation of the revolutionary groups, their organization and education. As every tool, on the other hand, social media has some weaknesses as well as strong sides. In a situation when the effectiveness of the tool depends on the quality of the leader's actions, being completely addictive to social media can be an obstacle to the emergence of a good leader. Moreover, governments can use social media for their own purposes. One of the protest tactics against protesters can be propagating false information to scare and head them to an area where anti-riot police are deployed. In many countries, government agents are highly specialized in creating controversy while searching for potential terrorists and pedophiles on the Internet. (Of course, such tactics can be used by both sides.) For example, during the protests in Iran in 2009 many foreign origin supporters of the Green Revolution spread false information to mislead observers via Twitter.

Governments can use social media effectively by following what the organizers of the protest via the internet are saying directly to his followers or by inserting someone into the group to leak information on where and when the protesters will gather. This method has been successfully applied in the protests during the meetings of World Trade Organization and the G-8 meeting and at Republican and Democratic national conventions in the United States.

Social media allows organizers of the movement to find and connect the similarly minded people with little expense; but it is not completely effective in making people take action. Internet penetration rate in countries such as Iran and Qatar are around 35%; that means regularly Internet users are in the minority community. In many of the developing countries to make a revolutionary movement successful, you will need to get the support of the middle class, working class, retirees, rural segments of the population and people without access to the internet. Otherwise, you cannot lead a movement and the movement may lose control on its own revolutionary forces and as a result it may be accused of being a marginal movement which doesn't have representative power. As in 2009, Iranian protesters experienced a situation like that.

Even when there is a thoroughly thought out plan of a leader who understands the media, there is the possibility of not being successful. For example, Thailand's former prime minister and telecommunications king Thaksin Shinawatra, despite the fact that he held two giant protests with 100,000 people in the stadium full of supporters via the video conference call in April 2009 and May of 2010, he failed against the Thai government.

Social media is just one of dozens tools that can be used by a protest group. You can not only rely on the information technology department while selling a company's products, similarly a revolutionary group doesn't rely on an only tech-savvy leader to launch a successful revolution. In short, social media cannot be a strategy alone it can be a part of the strategy.

Considered from this perspective, if political parties use the organization of the Social Network actively and effectively, their election campaign will have come a very serious way. Because these social networks are open to manipulation. During political elections, some candidates may try to get support of people by active manipulation of social media. For instance, changing the number of followers can affect a viewer's conclusion about candidate popularity. Integration of social media planning into an existing strategic communication structure may also be an effective way to ensure success. Another way to benefit from social media is to create a social media monitoring team to act as the eyes and ears of the strategy team. If you can implement communication strategies compatible with your projects, it is possible to become agenda on social networks.

The media, the sole arbiter in determining the agenda, began to share its power with people who create their own agenda in social networks. As a result, theories of communication started to be discussed about the media and public relations. One of these is the spiral of silence theory.

### **3. What is the Spiral of Silence?**

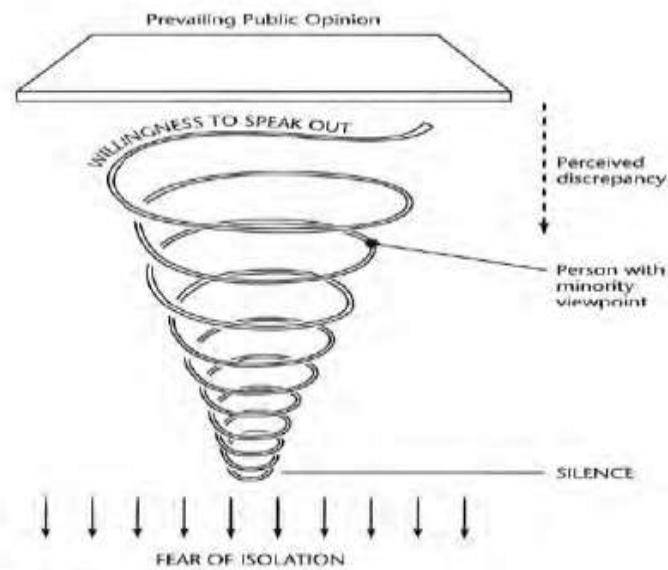
According to this theory when people's own thoughts are different from the prevailing opinion in society, they are afraid of being ostracized by society. They may not find the strength in themselves to deal with

the difficulties of this idea clashes, so they do not respond against dominant opinion and remain silent (Yaylagül, 2013:81).

As a testable theory, the spiral of silence has four components, it argues:

- That we fear social isolation and seek to avoid it.
- These fears are projected in the way we act and communicate. This can be explicit through speech, or implicit in our behaviours towards topics we find distasteful.
- Not only are these anxieties are communicated in our speech and action, but also the wider public has a 'quasi-statistical' sense of what views and opinions are and are not dominant. This has implications for individual behaviour: fearing social isolation people respond to their perceptions of mass opinion in ways that reinforce alignment with popular views and avoidance of unpopular ones.
- The mass media, which serves to both magnify (in terms of visibility) and reduce (in terms of what is repeated as being 'acceptable') public opinion.

(<http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Australian+Politics+in+a+Digital+Age/10381/ch04.html> accessed on 25 April 2014).



**Figure:** The Downward Spiral of Silence (Griffin, 2001:378).

Spiral of silence model was developed in Germany during the pre-election opinion surveys when measuring the difference between the votes of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Noelle-Neumann (1993) used the term 'spiral of silence' to define the process where individuals assess and monitor their social environment, adjusting their willingness to speak out based on their assessment of the climate of opinion. The more someone feels that his opinion is in the minority, the less he is willing to openly state it due to a fear of ridicule and / or rejection. According to Noelle-Neumann 'fear of exclusion' is the starting point of the spiral (Erdoğan and Alemdar, 2010:177).

However, seeing that their idea is voiced by someone else, individuals support it then. In spiral of silence model, it is important to get out of the spiral. This theory can also be greatly similar to herd psychology. In this case, opinion leaders' and audio-visual media's influence is enormous. At the same time, spiral of silence can be similar to neighborhood pressure (Erdoğan and Alemdar, 2010:177). Or it is similar to social control from a scientific point of view. Nelson Mandela stayed in prison 27 years, Socrates was punished because he confused his students ideas, Atatürk started the national struggle in a situation where it was discussed which country's mandate to choose. These are the prominent personalities who were able to break the spiral of silence. Because, exclusion by society was not so important for these individuals. Within the theory; the people/groups who always defend their unwelcomed idea in every condition are considered as an exception (Erdoğan and Alemdar, 2010:178).

Noelle-Neumann (1993) claims that deciding at the last minute in favor of the party which is likely to win cannot be explained with wanting to be on the winning side but it can be explained with the fear of exclusion and the fear of staying out of the general trend. The spiral of silence hardly ever develops against the media which constitutes the public opinion. Even if a small minority shares the view of the media, this minority is more inclined to talk, while others constitute the silent majority. In many cases, there is no other source of information for individuals other than the news media present.



In the battle for survival among opinions, the media therefore plays a crucial role. Because media teach people not so much what to believe and think, but rather what kind of opinions are accepted in public.

On important public issues not to be alone, many people look at the environment and look for clues about which thoughts are stronger which thoughts are on decline. Spiral is a process that is constantly changing. Following the changes in the environment, Individuals and / or groups try to adapt them (Yaylagül, 2013:83).

When it is explained before the elections that a political party will receive 40% or 50% votes, it has a direct impact on the trend of the population. If we re-evaluate this statement in accordance with the election polls, it is understandable why so many questionnaires are done and why the results of them are very different. As a result, according to this theory "silence means to accept" may not always be true.

According to Boz, people take as a reference two sources to see to what extent their ideas are welcomed by society. The first one is their close vicinity they observe themselves by living, the second one is tools of mass media (Boz, 2001:45). Media provides examples to individuals about what is happening and what's the dominant view in the community. Media plays an important role on how this mentioned 'dominant view' is presented to society. If a person thinks that his personal opinion is on decline, they can be less inclined to express it. The result is prevailing thought gets even stronger and it is legitimized (Yaylagül, 2013:83). In this case, the idea which is being withdrawn may seem that it has fewer supporters than it really has. Because they have been caught in a spiral of silence, they prefer to remain silent.

People, other than the general population, are afraid of being ostracized or isolated by their close vicinity (Yaylagül, 2013:82). On the basis of a large crowd, people can always find the opportunity to reach groups close to their own opinion; the main starting point of the fear is the isolation/exclusion risk by family and friends. The culture people live in has the largest share on a person's choice whether or not to express their opinions freely. And in some cultures, the free expression of ideas is almost forbidden. In a country where everyone is Muslim, an atheist may not tell this to others.

The possibility of the spiral of silence is high in areas with strong, well-defined customs and norms. In such kind of areas, conformism is seen more than other areas where individual and cultural diversity is encouraged. Additionally, some demographic variables like education, gender and race are crucial factors when it comes to expressing individual opinions (Moy et al., 2001:13).

#### **4. The Effect of Social Media on Spiral of Silence:**

In this new era that we are moving into, people are getting closer and all the traditional ways and understandings are changing very rapidly. Now people from all levels of society can find a way to voice their opinions.

According to the spiral of silence theory, media is the element which transmits the common view in society. Individuals learn from the media whether their opinion is in the majority or in the minority. But today social media has changed the situation. Whether they have common or minority opinion, everyone explains their idea about any issue. People are uniting in a very short time and their views can be heard by the whole world easily.

Social media has eliminated the fear of social exclusion quite a lot. Everyone created their own little public. It is possible to see that an opinion in social media may take a lot of support, about which we think that it is not common because it is without widespread media coverage. Or you may share your opposing opinion in social media without reservation about any relevant topic.

In January 2011 in an interview via YouTube, U.S. President Barack Obama described social networks as a place where universal values such as freedom of expression were emphasized.

Role of social media in protests and revolutions in recent years has been attracting quite a lot of media attention. According to the existing traditional view, social networks provide the opportunity to organize and to put into practice the regime change in an easier way. Egyptian authorities pulled the plug of the latest internet service provider in the middle of the protests across the country. The other four internet service providers in the country were previously closed by the intensification of the crisis (Link Egypt, Vodafone / Raya, Telecom Egypt and Etisalat Egypt) (<http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110202-social-mediatool-protest> accessed on 22 April 2014). Interestingly, switching off the Internet access didn't reduce the number of Egyptian protesters in the streets. On the contrary, closing the internet sites has grown to more protests, because then the spiral of silence was already broken.

Moreover, by using social media a movement needs less external financing due to lower organization and communication costs. Thus, a movement with broad participation and with fully internal resources can be carried out without foreign supporters.

Internet is effective not only in disseminating the ideological message of the revolution to the masses, but also training programs and action plans. This can also be done via e-mail; but a network of friends in social media may provide to be able share the information instantly, to keep the issue on the agenda and to allow more sharing by increasing the speed. However, this provided training will be limited. Social media can be more

useful in terms of selecting the day of action of a movement and when that day comes protests with a single Facebook or Twitter message can reach thousands of people within seconds.

Nowadays, people's perception of a country can be diverted easily by an English speaking and a media enthusiast protester's views without knowing that he/she represents a very small segment of that country. This happens because due to authoritarian regimes in some countries, media doesn't have a choice to provide news except Twitter or YouTube, and this situation further increases the importance of social media.

People are less likely to voice their opinions, and even less likely to act on them, if they believe themselves to be in the minority. And, people are more likely to count themselves as the minority if they do not see their opinions expressed in their environment. This is also the reason why dictators fear, more than anything, freedom of speech. Climates of opinion are very important for them and even in autocratic states leaders have to have some legitimacy from the public.

Having similar ideas and very strong feelings in opposition to the regime, some movements do not have an opinion supported by concrete data about the extent of their power and the presence of mass support necessary for the change of regime. In despotic regimes, since the public negotiating is limited, the potential of the opposition is not known and organizations in this direction are also very limited due to strict prosecution. Everyone is forced to live with an isolated anger in his quiet but lonely world. It is precisely in such an environment that social media gives people a strong inspiration about their capacity for changing the regime thanks to its uncontrollable feature by the government. Then they realize that they are more crowded than they think. Also, social media is unique in terms of forming a network quickly and organizing a large protest in the streets. Twitter, Facebook, mail groups can be used for a different purpose than they are usually used. As a result it may be possible to break the spiral of silence. A good example of this situation occurred in Egypt a few years ago. Egyptian government immediately imposed a ban on the internet, shut down the mobile phone networks, tried to control social media to suppress the revolution.

Some researchers claim that rapidly growing chat rooms, 'on-line' games or computer-based markets have brought new opportunities in order to have a livelier life for people who are actually isolated and feel themselves isolated. In fact Internet has created new areas which have features of eliminating people's 'fear of isolation and thus can be stripped from the spiral of silence. Internet is a platform where people can find many other people with the same mentality and with similar views.

There is also almost no distinction between the real and virtual world. According to the results of a survey carried out to compare and find out expressions of personal opinions in an online environment against a traditional environment, when the possibility of speaking out online increases, the possibility of speaking out in a real life also increases, and vice versa.

As Blankart (2013) mentions, "*Spirals of silence have been broken before, and we know from experience that once the first cracks appear, the collapse of a seemingly unshakable mainstream opinion can happen astonishingly fast.*" (<https://iea.org.uk/blog/the-euro-breaking-the-spiral-of-silence> Accessed at 10.03.2014) The hope for this view is that internet technologies are uniquely resistant to top-down control.

## II. CONCLUSION

The world is changing very rapidly and many countries in the world have already moved into a "digital democracy" era in which the Internet is playing a more important role in making the political agenda accessible to the public through the web (Solop, 2001:291). Social media is the very recent tool of internet and affecting people all around the world.

Chat rooms, forums, instant messaging media (Facebook, MSN, Skype, Yahoo Messenger, Gtalk, Twitter, etc.) are places where people who have very different views come together. It may be too assertive to claim that in these places, there are people who have very little fear of exclusion or people who have defeated it completely. The good side is, in an online debate, individuals may leave the discussion to avoid the feeling of pressure and the need to adapt to the opinion of the majority. What's more, in an online environment, even if a single person who has the ability to stimulate the minority group on the opposition side begins to speak out, the spiral of silence may end. Another reason why the spiral of silence occurs less in an online environment comparing to real life situation is that people may be offline and thus it may be impossible to know whether they support the dominant opinion or not.

It is discussed by social scientists that Internet, especially the social media causes global oversight and individual alienation as well as it provides shared association and freedom of individuals. Today people's delivering private information to global and interactive world and leaking this information to the public sphere has reached extreme proportions. Existing data collection systems offer the possibility of personal information to be reported by analyzing Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites, blogs and other web content. Therefore, people's private information, photographs and content sharing can be viewed by others without the user's consent or without being known or seen. Nowadays, internet and communication circuits replace the architectural old wall designs which facilitate continuous monitoring of the auditors and constitute a new

panopticon. What's more people who use social networks don't consider it as a problem. In fact, they delight in the thought of being monitored.

Social media can be manipulated during elections and the perceptions of voters can be affected when they are making their decisions. Around the world, social media are becoming commonplace tools for political and social activism, since the Internet provides a powerful tool for users to access online opinions (Yıldırım, 2010:125).The creation and growth of various online groups and communities help eliminate the feeling of isolation among individuals with minority view.

Given all this, it may be considered that the validity of the spiral of silence has begun to decrease by the help of social media today. At least there is another player in the field of agenda creating. Hence it can be concluded that the occurring of spiral of silence in the future will be more difficult thanks to the development and diversification of mass media tools.

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