

ANALYSIS OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO AGENDA SETTING AND SPIRAL OF SILENCE, IN THE CONTEXT OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This paper analyses the theoretical approaches of the Agenda-Setting Theory and the Spiral of Silence Theory in the context of North Macedonia. The Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media has the power to influence what people think and talk about by selecting and highlighting specific topics over others. In North Macedonia, the media has a significant influence on shaping public opinion on political and social issues. The Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that individuals are more likely to express their opinions publicly if they believe their opinion is popular or in line with the majority.

Conversely, individuals are less likely to express their opinions publicly if they believe their opinion is unpopular or in the minority. In North Macedonia, this theory can have a significant impact on the political and social discourse, leading to a distorted public perception of issues.

The paper concludes by highlighting the relevance of these theories in understanding the media landscape and ensuring that all voices are heard in the public discourse in North Macedonia.

Keywords: theoretical approach media, agenda setting, spiral of silence, public opinion, North Macedonia

I. Introduction

The agenda-setting theory and spiral of silence are two theoretical approaches that explain how the media shapes public opinion and perception. The agenda-setting theory states that the media has the power to influence what people think about by controlling the information they receive, while the spiral of silence theory suggests that people are hesitant to express their opinions if they believe they are in the minority.

This paper will analyse the theoretical approaches of the agenda-setting theory and the spiral of silence, providing a critical evaluation of their strengths and limitations.

II. Overview of Theoretical Approach of “Agenda-Setting” Theory

The agenda-setting theory is based on the idea that the media has the power to control what people think about by highlighting certain issues and downplaying others. This theory suggests that the media's ability to set the agenda for public discussion can influence people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. The agenda-setting theory has been widely studied and applied in various contexts, including political campaigns, public health, and social movements.

Agenda setting theory suggests that media has the power to influence public opinion by selecting and highlighting certain topics or issues. According to this theory, the media does not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. Agenda setting theory proposes that the more frequently a topic is presented in the media, the more important it becomes in the minds of the public. This theory is based on the idea that people rely on the media to provide them with information about the world, and therefore the media has a significant impact on what issues are considered relevant or important.

The agenda setting theory was first proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, and it has since been refined and expanded upon by other researchers. Some of the key principles of agenda setting theory include:

1. *The media has the power to set the agenda by deciding which issues or topics to cover and how much attention to give to them.*
2. *The media agenda influences the public agenda by shaping which issues or topics people think about and consider important.*
3. *The media agenda is not necessarily the same as the public agenda, but there is a strong relationship between the two.*

One of the strengths of the agenda-setting theory is that it has been supported by numerous empirical studies. For example, the study conducted by (McCombs, M., & Shaw, D., 1972), found a strong correlation between the media's coverage of certain issues and the public's perception of their importance. The study showed that people who were exposed to more news coverage about a particular issue perceived it as more important than those who were not exposed to as much coverage. (McCombs, M. 2014).

Other studies have shown that the media's coverage of certain topics can influence public opinion and policy decisions (Stuard Soroka Shanto Iyengar, 2002).

Despite its empirical support, agenda setting theory has also been criticized for its oversimplification of the relationship between the media and the public. Critics argue that the theory neglects the role of individual differences, such as cognitive processing, media use, and social context, in shaping the impact of media content (Ansah, Patrick Owusu; Ke Guo; Lian Zhu, 2021). Furthermore, the theory is often criticized for its lack of attention to the power dynamics involved in agenda setting. For example, the theory does not consider the influence of political elites or interest groups in shaping the media's agenda (Delli Carpini, M. X., & Williams, 2001).

However, the agenda-setting theory also has some limitations. One of the limitations is that it assumes a passive audience, meaning that people are simply influenced by the media without any critical thought or active engagement. This assumption has been challenged by other theories that suggest that people are actively engaged in interpreting and constructing their own meaning from the media content they consume.

The Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that the media has the power to influence what people think and talk about by selecting and highlighting specific topics over others. This theory proposes that the media sets the agenda for public discussion by controlling the information that is presented and how it is presented. In North Macedonia, the media has a significant influence on shaping public opinion on political and social issues. The media's agenda-setting power can influence what topics are discussed and how they are framed, ultimately shaping public perception.

For example, during the 2018 referendum for the name change of the country from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia, the media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion. The media highlighted the pros and cons of the name

change, and the framing of the issue influenced public opinion. The media emphasized the potential benefits of the name change, such as the possibility of joining NATO and the EU, while also highlighting the concerns of those opposed to the change. Ultimately, the media's agenda-setting power played a vital role in shaping public opinion and the outcome of the referendum. (Vučković, V. 2019).

III. Overview of Theoretical Approach of “Spiral of Silence” Theory

The spiral of silence theory suggests that people are hesitant to express their opinions if they believe they are in the minority. This theory argues that people are influenced by their perception of public opinion and are more likely to speak out if they believe their views are in line with the majority. On the other hand, people are more likely to remain silent if they believe their views are in the minority.

Spiral of silence theory has been applied to a wide range of social and political issues, such as attitudes towards abortion, homosexuality, and climate change. The theory suggests that the dominant opinion on a particular issue can be reinforced by the media's portrayal of that issue, which can create a self-perpetuating spiral of silence (Mutz, 1998). For example, if the media consistently portrays climate change as a minor issue, individuals who are concerned about the issue may be less likely to speak out publicly, which can reinforce the perception that climate change is not an important issue.

Spiral of silence theory has been supported by empirical research. For example, studies have shown that individuals are more likely to voice their opinions publicly if they perceive that their views are widely shared (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

The spiral of silence theory was first proposed by (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1974), and it has since been studied and refined by other researchers. According to Noelle-Neumann, some of the key principles of spiral of silence theory include:

- 1. People are constantly monitoring the opinions of those around them in order to gauge whether their own opinions are in line with the majority.*
- 2. People are more likely to express their opinions if they believe that they are in the majority, and less likely to express their opinions if they believe that they are in the minority.*
- 3. The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and can create the perception that certain opinions are more dominant than they actually are.*

One of the strengths of the spiral of silence theory is that it explains why some people may be hesitant to express their opinions even when they strongly believe in them. This theory has been applied in various contexts, including political discussions, workplace communication, and online interactions.

However, the spiral of silence theory also has some limitations. The theory has also been criticized for its lack of attention to individual differences and the role of social context.

One of the limitations is that it assumes a homogeneous public opinion, meaning that people have a clear understanding of what the majority opinion is. This assumption has been challenged by other theories that suggest that public opinion is complex and fragmented, with different groups holding different opinions on the same issue. (Noelle-Neumann, E. 1993).

The Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that individuals are more likely to express their opinions publicly if they believe their opinion is popular or in line with the majority. Conversely, individuals are less likely to express their opinions publicly if they believe their opinion is unpopular or in the minority. This phenomenon can lead to a situation where a vocal minority dominates the political and social discourse, leading to a distorted public perception of issues. In North Macedonia, the Spiral of Silence Theory can have a significant impact on the political and social discourse, ultimately shaping the country's society.

For example, during the protests in North Macedonia in 2019, individuals who opposed the government were less likely to express their opinions publicly because they believed their opinion was in the minority. This phenomenon can lead to a situation where the vocal minority dominates the discourse, leading to a distorted public perception of issues. However, as the protests continued, and more individuals expressed their opinions publicly, the Spiral of Silence Theory became less relevant, and the political and social discourse became more balanced.

IV. Comparison and Contrast

Both agenda setting theory and spiral of silence theory emphasize the important role that media plays in shaping public opinion. However, there are some key differences between the two theories. For example:

- 1. Agenda setting theory focuses on the media's ability to influence what topics people think about, while spiral of silence theory focuses on the media's ability to influence whether people express their opinions.*
- 2. Agenda setting theory assumes that people are passive recipients of media messages, while spiral of silence theory assumes that people are active participants in the communication process.*
- 3. Agenda setting theory suggests that media coverage can influence the public's perception of issue importance, while spiral of silence theory suggests that media coverage can influence the public's perception of issue popularity.*

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the agenda-setting theory and spiral of silence theory are two important theoretical approaches that explain how the media shapes public opinion and perception. While the agenda-setting theory has been supported by numerous empirical studies, it also has some limitations, including the assumption of a passive audience.

The spiral of silence theory, on the other hand, has been applied in various contexts and explains why some people may be hesitant to express their opinions. However, it also has some limitations, including the assumption of a homogeneous public opinion.

Agenda-Setting Theory and Spiral of Silence Theory are two significant theories in the field of communication studies that help explain the role of media in shaping public opinion and the impact of political and social issues on the society of North Macedonia. The media's agenda-setting power can influence what topics are discussed and how they are framed, ultimately shaping public perception. The Spiral of Silence Theory can have a significant impact on the political and social discourse in North Macedonia, leading to a distorted public perception of issues. Understanding these theories can help individuals and organizations to better navigate the media landscape and ensure that all voices are heard in the public discourse.

Overall, these two theories provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between the media and public opinion, but further research is needed to fully understand their strengths and limitations.

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