



Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application

Fourth Edition

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Spiral of Silence Theory

Chapter Overview

- SST at a Glance
- Introduction
- The Court of Public Opinion
- Assumptions of SST
- The Media's Influence
- The Train Test
- The Hard Core
- Integration and Critique

SST at a Glance

- Media have profound effects on public opinion
- Mass media work with majority opinion to silence minority beliefs
- Fear of isolation prompts those with minority views to examine beliefs of others

Introduction

- People with a minority viewpoint remain in the background
 - Communication will be constrained
- People with a majority viewpoint become more encouraged to speak

The Court of Public Opinion

- Noelle-Neumann founded and directed Allensbach Institute
- *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion-Our Social Skin*, separates public opinion into
 - Public
 - Opinion
- **Public opinion** is the attitudes and behaviors expressed in public in order to avoid isolation

Assumptions of SST

- Society threatens deviant individuals with isolation; fear of isolation is pervasive
 - Agreement on values decreases fear of isolation and vice versa
 - Research by Asch and Noelle-Neumann provided support for this assumption

Assumptions of SST

- The fear of isolation causes individuals to try to assess the climate of opinions at all times
 - Individuals receive information about public opinion from
 - Personal observation
 - The media

Assumptions of SST

- The fear of isolation causes individuals to try to assess the climate of opinions at all times
 - Quasi-statistical sense
 - Pluralistic ignorance

Assumptions of SST

- Public behavior is affected by public opinion assessment
 - Public behavior takes the form of
 - Speaking out
 - Keeping silent
 - Humans avoid discussing topics when their viewpoint differs from the majority

Example of The Spiral of Silence

PUBLIC OPINION AS COMMUNICATED BY THE MEDIA

"Marijuana is used by people to help ease discomfort caused by illness."



Willingness to Speak Out



Quasi-Statistical Sense
"Surveys show that people overwhelmingly support laws allowing medicinal marijuana distribution."

Majority View
"People should be able to smoke pot for medicinal reasons."

Silent Minority
"Marijuana is a drug that should be completely illegal."



Fear of Isolation (Inward Assessments)
"I don't want to be perceived as insensitive and without compassion for the sick and suffering."

The Media's Influence

- Most people alter opinions with changes in the media
- Media provides phrases so people can speak about a subject
- The news media gives the public a limited view of reality

The Media's Influence

- The media are
 - Ubiquitous
 - Cumulative
 - Consonant
- People experience the climate of public opinion through the mass media
 - Dual climate of opinion

The Train Test

- An assessment of the extent people will speak out
- **The question:** At the beginning of a 5-hour train ride, a person sits next to you and starts discussing the problems of food safety. Would you talk or not talk about the topic to the person?

The Train Test

Findings

- Supporters of the dominant opinion are more willing to speak out
- Men from large cities, aged 45-59 are more willing to speak out
- Various ways of speaking out exist
- People share their opinions more with those who agree

The Train Test

Findings, continued

- People will voice an opinion if it aligns with current trends
- People draw the strength of their convictions from a variety of sources
- People engage in “last-minute swings”

The Hard Core

- If the majority opinion becomes large enough, the majority voice becomes less powerful
- The hard core moved public opinion on AIDS

Example of The Spiral of Silence

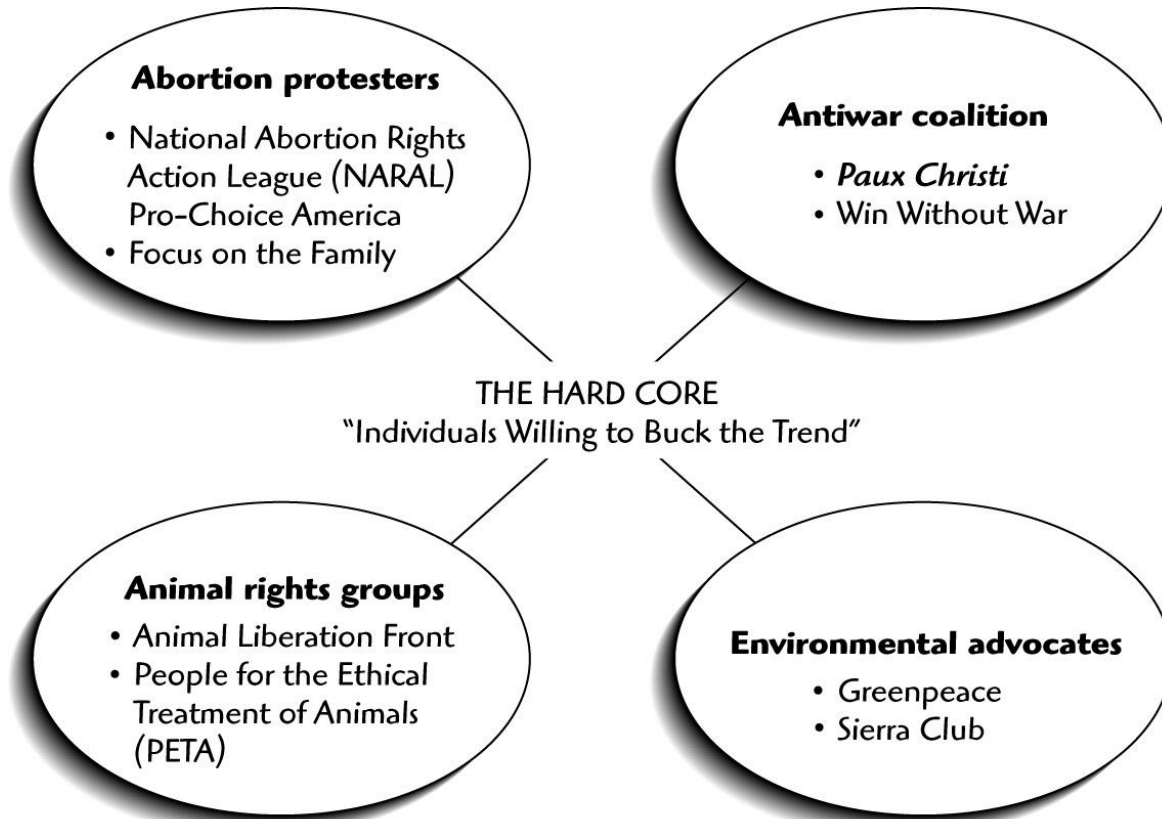


Figure 24.2
Examples of the
"Hard Core" in the
United States

Integration

- Communication traditions
 - Cybernetic
 - Socio-psychological
- Communication context
 - Mass/media
- Approach to knowing
 - Positivistic/empirical

Critical Strengths of SST

- Logical Consistency
 - Fails to acknowledge ego involvement
 - Avoids the issue of selectivity
 - Inadequate support for when people speak out
 - Failure to test fear of isolation assumption
- Heurism
 - Attracts scholars
 - Employed in studies on many topics