

What? Did You Say Something?

Social media is defined as an internet platform in which there is the creation and exchange of user generated content [1]. Any single person who has an account on a social media site (SMS) is able to participate and provide new information that they themselves generate. The type of content that they create can vary from personal life updates to political outlook. Therefore, it is not a stretch to say that the establishment of SMS have increased the ability to have open and free communication, connecting people all around the world and closing the cultural and socioeconomic gap among us. It is important to note however, that the original intent of using various social media was to use it as a form of entertainment but now it has evolved to be a source of news and a platform to discuss controversial positions. While this transition has continued, the Pew Center for Internet Research has found that users do not feel comfortable sharing their opinions on SMS for fear of being rejected by unlike minded followers, supporting the “spiral of silence” effect [2]. The “spiral of silence” effect in essence suggests that if your opinion is in the minority within a group, then you are less likely to speak out about it. I agree with the Pew Center’s evaluation that social media has enhanced the “spiral of silence” effect by suggesting two reasons as to why users do not offer their views – large number of followers and the original purpose of social media.

First, with the increase in followers and friends in one’s network, it is difficult to appeal to all views and it is inevitable that there will be individuals who would disagree and/or unfollow the user. The Pew Center report indicates that when asked about government surveillance programs they were more likely to offer an opinion or jump into a conversation when the participants were a part of their inner social circle [2]. This inner circle mainly contains family and very close friends – about 6-7 people [3]. These individuals usually influence or develop

your own ideas so they will more likely align with what you believe so one is not as afraid to offer an opinion in this situation. However, when you throw in all of your friends and acquaintances that you have following you on social media then the user is more likely to restrain their thoughts and not offer them when posting. Thus, since the user is refraining from contributing opinions online due to the fact that they have a larger circle of social connections there, then social media is intensifying the effects of the “spiral of silence”. I believe that this would hold true not only for the minority opinion but also the majority as they would also not want to lose friends or followers within their network.

The second reason that I believe the “spiral of silence” effect is perpetuated by current SMS is that they have deviated away from their original purpose. When founded, many of today’s top social media sites were used as entertainment. A way to pass time and interact with friends. Now they have transitioned to promote businesses, elicit targeted advertising and introduce controversial topics which I believe turns off individuals from offering opinions and thoughts. Research has also shown that because of this targeted atmosphere, users have become more alert about how their information is tracked, deterring them from expressing or engaging in conversation on SMS [4]. Many people, myself included, have continued to only use SMS as a passive entity. In fact, in my personal experience I have only seen older adults engage in political conversation where there could be debatable points. As a young adult, I only like and share neutral articles with no political basis and upload personal updates, keeping with the spirit of the original intent of SMS. I find that it is a more enjoyable experience to have this lighthearted and not as serious platform. I think many people see the infiltration of targeted advertising and heated topics as dissuading from expressing opinions, propagating the “spiral of silence”. We gravitate then more towards keeping the SMS as a passive unit and purely entertainment factor, the news and

arguments are for journalists and online news sources, not in a space that many people escape to in order to relax.

In conclusion, social media sites have effectively heightened the “spiral of silence’ theory promoting less interaction and expression of ideas with others. There is more likeliness of an individual to entrust those opinions with someone within their family of close friends rather than with the larger following on SMS which include acquaintances of whom you do not know their political stance. Further, the transition to a more volatile environment in terms of targeted advertising and news outbreaks have prevented others from engaging in conversation for fear of rejection by followers and in order to maintain the original essence of social media – entertainment and connection.

References

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