

Enlightenment of “The Spiral of Silence” Theory to Enterprise Crisis Management

Wenzhou Zhang

Shiyan Radio & TV University, Shiyan Institute of Education, Hubei

No. 5-3-402, Century Garden, Dongyue Road, Shiyan 442000, Hubei Province, China

E-mail: hbsyzwz@yahoo.com.cn

Abstract

The formation of network society multiplies crisis spreading of enterprises, so crisis management in network times has become a significant task for enterprises to discover and study. Herein we claim “The Spiral of Silence” Theory continues to play a role in network spreading, which provides enterprise crisis management with a new perspective.

Keywords: Network spreading, “The Spiral of Silence”, Enterprise crisis management

In late 20th Century, as excellent representation of high technology international network and information high way provide people with capacious space for production, living and activity, and our society gradually steps into network society. Modern enterprises have to bear crisis consciousness, i.e. think of danger in times of peace and prepare for a rainy day, in mind and sufficiently consider and emphasize enterprise crisis management in order to win business competition. We propose in this paper that “The Spiral of Silence” Theory provides enterprise crisis management with a new perspective.

1. Brief Introduction of “The Spiral of Silence” Theory

“The Spiral of Silence” was primarily shown in the paper published on *Journal of Communication Research* by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, German sociologist, in 1974. She generalized this theory comprehensively in the book “The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin” published in 1980.

This theory is based on the following case. Allensbach Research Institution of Germany made a study in 1965 on the coming national selection. During the research process, the two Parties always run neck and neck in the selection. The first estimate result showed the two Parties both have opportunity to win. However 6 months later, i.e. 2 months before the selection, the winning possibility of the Christianity Democracy Party to the other Party is 4:1. The last 2 weeks before the selection, the Christianity Democracy Party won 4% of votes, but the Society Democracy Party lost 5% of that. In the selection of the same year, the Christianity Democracy Party won finally leading with 9% over the other one.

The concept of the spiral of silence came from the confusion brought by this selection, and scholars have been trying to interpret it. The basis idea could be described as follows: Avoid social punishment due to isolation. People tend to observe surrounding opinions before pointing out an idea. A person is likely to voice an opinion boldly and actively if one feels that one is in the “majority” or “advantageous” opinions; while he is likely to turn to be “silent” or echo due to environmental pressure if one feels that one is in the “minority” or “disadvantageous” opinions. The opinions emphasized by public media are underground and spread widely, so they are easily perceived as “majority” or “advantageous” opinions. During the spiral expanding of “silence of disadvantageous opinions” and “voice of advantageous opinions”, advantageous “majority opinions” in social life—consensus, comes into being.

Neumann proposed a hypothesis: most of individuals will choose public media opinion to avoid isolation from holding particular attitude and belief. One is not willing to voice his own opinion for fear of isolation. Actually this cognition almost exists in everyone’s mind both in western and eastern society, especially for the Chinese people experiencing “Culture Revolution”. However Professor Neumann caught this phenomenon and proposed hypothesis: dominant and increasingly supported opinions are more advantageous, while the opposite side tends to lose voice step by step. Thus, the situation of one party with voice but the other with silence turns out to be a spiral process which constantly establishes main opinion from one opinion. If public media participate in this process, the spiral will be formed more quickly and obviously. Neumann claimed not until 18th Century public opinion came to be realized by people, but in fact has existed for thousands of years already in human society,

and continuously creates and maintains harmony and consistency for social movement. Therefore public opinion could be regarded as a kind of social control, objectively for “promoting social integration, guarantee basic behavior and equalize opinions”. This theory is based on the analysis on social conforming mentality and convergent behavior. The power of opinion roots in social essence, social punishment on forbidden opinions and behavior and individual fear of isolation. In society when favorable voice is getting high, frightened individual shows this favorable voice, but when it is going down, he keeps silence which helps to loose popularity of previous opinion.

The Spiral of Silence Theory is approved widely, but at the same time it arouses some criticism. One of them points out: this theory excessively emphasizes the social psychology factor—“fear of isolation”, but ignores other motive factors which also cause social behavior. A person may take action by tradeoff without surely keeping silence, even if he feels isolated. Someone will not keep silence when afraid of isolation; even probably give aggressive speech or action. Herein individual differences have to be considered. The fear of “social isolation” isn’t an exact constancy, but a restricted variable. The pressure from “majority opinion” represents on different level to different types and qualities of topics.

2. “The Spiral of Silence” Continue to Play Roles in Network Spreading

Since the Internet entered into China, it has changed media aspect greatly and aroused attentions of the field. Regarded as “the fourth media”, the Internet starts an unprecedented “speaking storm” in Chinese Internet users group. So the Internet has been looked on as the most open media. The network times provides us with a completely new life style and thinking perspective. Network integrates traditional several of transmitting medias, such as interpersonal media, organizational media, group media, public media. Especially the mutuality and anonymity of network provide us with unprecedented free media space. When we perceive network audience’s real heart, consider the times background of the whole information society, and investigate several influential events on the Internet, we find out that network has not fulfill the equality of every voice, that is to say, “the Spiral of Silence” is still exist in network times, and Neumann’s theory still play roles.

At the beginning of 2010, China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) issued “The 25th China Internet Network Development Statistic Report” whose data show, there are 384 million Chinese Internet users by Dec. 2009. The value of Internet as a daily tool is increasing. The effect of conforming mentality, which plays an important role in “The Spiral of Silence” hypothesis, hasn’t changed even when network age is coming. From psychology perspective, conforming mentality mainly comes from maladjustment of acquisition and fear of isolation. The pressure from majority generates maladjustment, and conforming is an effective method to reduce maladjustment. Although the majority is not stable in network, people can balance maladjustment by transferring group but not conforming when feel maladjustment in certain group. However users’ understanding on the opinions on line may be greatly different from real life, because they usually form a discussion group with the ones holding the same opinion as them. Therefore to great extent they always look on their own opinions as those of others. Looking-glass perception, false consensus and other perception differences have emerged. In network space some hypothesis and mentality mechanism still exist due to “The Spiral of Silence”. The similarity of network media and real media produces the possibility of “The Spiral of Silence” on line.

Simultaneously, the audience is braver on line on lack of conditions for producing fear of social isolation. Or they surely believe what they have done will not be isolated. Whether the spreading is open or not is not decided by media, but by spreading matters, thus it doesn’t matter whether the opinions on line is open or secret. Furthermore we have no reasons to think corresponding crowd and group rules will not develop in network space. This sort of group rules necessarily gives its members pressures and fear of social isolation similar to those in real life. Therefore, due to the existing of psychology mechanism of the spiral of silence in network space and the similarity of network spreading and real media, the spiral of silence phenomenon has not disappeared, only takes on in another way.

3. Enlightenment of “The Spiral of Silence” Theory to Enterprise Crisis Management

Crisis is a universal phenomenon for enterprises’ survival and development in network society. How to identify, evaluate, survey and control risks has become a hot topic for enterprises to consider together. Network media has gradually become a platform to spread consensus over media, region and hierarchy. Also it is the original place of consensus and essential position of consensus spreading. Crisis management in network times is a significant issue for enterprises to discover and study. Proper implementing “The Spiral of Silence” theory probably provides enterprises a new perspective for crisis management.

3.1 Recognize the Complexity of Network Information Environment Sufficiently

Well-control of information environment is extremely important to dealing with crisis public relations. Compared to traditional media times, network times are getting more complex in enterprises' information environment, which shows as follows. Firstly, the spreading of a variety of information can't be controlled, which means the time, content and source of spreading can't be controlled. Secondly, enterprises' information represents asymmetry. Information asymmetry means extensive speaking rights generates diversification of information source and unprecedented increasing of information quantity. During the process of increasing information, everyone speaks out no matter who they are or whether regular or not, which results in information increases continuously in all aspects. The increase of information causes good and evil information mixed up, so suddenly people have to distinguish true and false information. The difficulty of dealing with enormous information will easily happen due to information surplus, which leads to public suspicion to information, and furthermore hard work of crisis management.

3.2 Understand Channels and Forms of Network Spreading

Channels and forms of network spreading are the primary positions confronting crisis management, and they represent in the following aspects.

3.2.1 Network News

Network news breaks through traditional news transmission concept and gives audience a completely new experience on watch, audition and sense. It integrates disorganized news in order and compresses information so that people can acquire the most effective news within shortest time. Due to the comment function of present network news, it has become a mutual communication platform.

3.2.2 Network Community

Network community refers to communication space on line, such as BBS/Forum, Post Bar, Bulletin, Group Discussion, Chat on Line, Making Friends, Personal Space, and Wireless Added Service. The network community on the same theme centralizes visitors with common interest.

3.2.3 E-Mail

Compared with traditional mail, e-mail is faster, more convenient, cheaper, more functional and more instant. Enterprises can make one-to-one communication with audience, and also transmit management science and propagandize products or service by e-mail.

3.2.4 Search Engine

Search engine is an index service system which organizes and handles information by utilizing particular computer program to search information on line according to certain strategy, and then display handled information to users.

3.3 Effectively Utilize Stakeholders' Collaboration

Stakeholder is any related one outside of organization but influenced by strategy and action of the organization. Stakeholder is able to influence organization as well, whose opinions have to be considered as factors on condition of strategy. Stakeholders belong to different categories whose stakeholders are in situations of decentralize and unknown to each other. The development of network enables them to be related by opportunity and form alliance. This alliance is established through instant communication tools or issuing information in network community. The topic of common interest attracts attentions of each other, so dispersive stakeholders will search their own supporting power by network information. Looking for the same voice, forming alliance, and then they strengthen the alliance by all kinds of channels of network transmission in order to form a variety of stakeholder alliances one by one.

Enterprise crisis managers should effectively utilize these stakeholder alliances, because once they get interested in the products and service, they are very likely to become the "majority" or "advantageous" opinion in network environment, consequently they will drive those individuals or crowds with "minority" or "disadvantageous" opinion to be "silent" or conforming under environmental pressure.

3.4 Strengthen Own "Advantageous" Opinion

"The Spiral of Silence" Theory claims the indication of opinion and the diffusion of "silence" are spiral social transmission processes. The "silence" of one party causes increasing power of the other party, which makes "advantageous" opinion more powerful, furthermore this increasing power again turn over to force more opposite-opinion-holders to keep silence. Therefore for enterprise crisis management, they need to build

favorable “consensus” to their products and services. With regards to favorable “advantageous” opinions, positive strengthening measurements should be implemented in order to generate herding effect for extensive spreading; with regards to evil ones, negative strengthening measurements need to be carried out to dispose them even disappear forever.

3.5 Build Network “Opinion Environment”

“The Spiral of Silence” Theory claims public media influences and restricts consensus by building “opinion environment”. The formation of network space consensus is not caused by “rational discussion” of “network crowds”, but by the pressure of “opinion environment” which affects people for fear of encouragement and force them to conform with “advantageous opinions”, which is a non-rational process. The main information source of opinion environment in network environment is the same as that of real life in the following two aspects. At first, the crowds are the same, such as every small group in network community. Next, the influential factors of network transmission on people’s perception are the same as real society with TV’s popularity from Neumann’s point of view. Firstly, resonance effect means big similarity of what network spreads. Secondly, accumulation effect refers to the durative and repetitive in practice of the transmission of same-category information. Thirdly, universal effect represents the universality of information transmission scope. At present, the popular “news-making” is a real case of building network “opinion environment”. In crisis management, enterprises can build network “opinion environment” on purpose and lead favorable opinions on their products and service to be “advantageous” opinions so as to achieve success.

References

- Ding Haimeng. (2009). *On the Two Challenges Enterprise Crisis Public Relations Facing and its Reasons in the Age of Internet*. Press Circles.
- Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. (2000). *Public Perception Theory: The Concept of Spiral of Silence. Selected by Chang Changfu. Science of Public Media: Influence Research Mode*. Beijing: China Social Science Press.
- Guo Qingguang. (1999). *The Course of Communications*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- Liu Hailong. (2001). Will the Spiral of Silence disappear in the cyberspace. *Journal of International Communication*.
- Xie Xinzhou. (2003). An Empirical Study on “The Spiral of Silence” in Internet Environment. *Modern Communications*.