Spiral of Silence – Elizabeth Noelle-Nuemann
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Spiral of Silence

of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

The 1980 U.S. presidential election seemed too close to call. Polls reported that President Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan were in a virtual dead heat during the final two months of the campaign. But according to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, professor of communication research at the University of Mainz in Germany, most pollsters asked the wrong question. Instead of asking, *Who do you plan to vote for?* they should have asked, *Who do you think will win the election?*

They would have discovered that even while voter preference was holding equal, the expectation that Reagan would win was growing from week to week. Noelle-Neumann claims that people's assessment of the political climate, and especially their forecast of future trends, are early and reliable indicators of what will happen in an election. In Carter's case they were. The night before the vote, Democratic pollster Pat Caddell went to the president and sadly announced that the contest was over. Millions of voters were taking part in a last-minute swing for Reagan. The actual vote the next day buried Carter in a Republican landslide.

Public opinion
Attitudes one can express without running the danger of isolating oneself; a tangible force that keeps people in line.

Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence is a theory that explains the growth and spread of *public opinion*. As founder and director of the Public Opinion Research Center in Allensbach (the German counterpart of America's Gallup poll organization), she has come to recognize the power of public opinion. Like seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, she regards public opinion as a *tangible force* that keeps people in line. Locke outlined three forms of law—*divine, civil,* and *opinion.* He claimed that the law of opinion is the only law by which people really abide.[1] For any morally loaded topics that are strongly controversial, Noelle-Neumann defines public opinion as "attitudes one can express without running the danger of isolating oneself."[2]

Spiral of silence
The increasing pressure people feel to conceal their views when they think they are in the minority.

The term *spiral of silence* refers to the increasing pressure people feel to conceal their views when they think they are in the minority. Noelle-Neumann believes that television accelerates the spiral, but to grasp the role of the mass media in the process we first must understand people's extraordinary sensitivity to the ever-changing standard of what society will tolerate.

A QUASI-STATISTICAL ORGAN SENSING THE CLIMATE OF OPINION

Noelle-Neumann is constantly amazed at the human ability to discern the climate of public opinion. Science has fixed on five bodily receptors through which

people sense their environment: eye (sight), ear (sound), tongue (taste), nose (smell), skin (touch). Only half facetiously, the veteran pollster suggests that humans have a *quasi-statistical organ*—a sixth sense that tallies up information about what society in general is thinking and feeling. It's as if people come equipped with antennae that quiver to every shift in the social breeze. How else, she says, can we account for the fact that "when a swing in the climate occurs for or against a party, a person, or a particular idea, it seems to be sensed everywhere at almost exactly the same time, by [everybody?]"[3] Without benefit of random samples, interview schedules, or frequency distributions, average people can tell which way the wind is blowing before the scientific polls capture the climate of public opinion.

Quasi-statistical organ
A sixth sense that tallies up information about what society in general is thinking and feeling.

Noelle-Neumann recommends two questions to get at the barometric readings inside people's heads:

1. Present climate: *Regardless of your personal opinion, do you think most people . . . ?*

2. Future forecast: *Will more or fewer people think this way a year from now?*

People rarely respond, "How should I know?" or "I'm no prophet."[4] She believes that assessing the public mood, present or future, is the most natural thing in the world for people to do. More than 30 years of survey experience has convinced her that people usually get it right. Even when they misread the present, they still can spot future trends. For example, near the end of every year, poll-takers from her research center ask a representative sample of German men and women, "Do you look forward to the coming year with hopes or with fears?" The level of optimism expressed shows no relationship to economic growth in the year the question is asked, but it gives an uncanny forecast of the actual rise or fall in the growth rate of the nation's GNP for *the following year.*

The human ability to spot momentum in public opinions is not used frivolously. Noelle-Neumann says it requires an unbelievable expenditure of energy to figure out which ideas are on the increase and which are on the decline. The tremendous concentration required to monitor social trends makes sense only when compared with a greater strain—the danger of isolating oneself with an opinion that has gone out of style. "The effort spent in observing the environment is apparently a smaller price to pay than the risk of losing the goodwill of one's fellow human beings—of becoming rejected, despised, alone."[5]

FEAR OF ISOLATION: THE ENGINE THAT DRIVES THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

According to Noelle-Neumann, the fear of isolation is the centrifugal force that accelerates the spiral of silence. She draws heavily on the famous conformity research of Swarthmore psychologist Solomon Asch to support her claim. Asch demonstrated that people will ignore the plain evidence of their senses and yield to perceived group pressure.[6]

A _____
B   _____
C _____
X _____

Look at the lines above. Which line—A, B, or C—is the same length as line X? The answer seems obvious, and left alone, everyone picks line A. But put an

individual in a group of experimental confederates who unanimously state that line B is the right answer, and the unsuspecting subject will feel great anxiety. Thoughts of isolation are very real to the person who considers standing firm: *Will these folks frown, argue, or curse my stubbornness? Worse yet, will they snicker or laugh at me? If I say what I really think, will they turn away in contempt or kick me out of the group?* Asch found that most people placed in this stressful situation would conform to the group's judgment at least some, if not all, of the time.

Is fear of isolation a trait peculiar to Americans? Noelle-Neumann rejects that possibility on the basis of Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram's follow-up study conducted in Europe. Milgram selected France and Norway as nations with strikingly diverse cultures—the first one highly individualistic, the other with a strong sense of cohesiveness. As he anticipated, Norwegians conformed more than the French. But like their American counterparts, the majority of people from both countries were unable to stand firm in the face of group pressure.[7]

Noelle-Neumann also considers the possibility that people conform more out of a desire to identify with a winner than to avoid isolation. For example, after an important election is over, a greater percentage of people report voting for the victor than the ballot totals would indicate. But she doesn't consider false reports as attempts to climb belatedly on the bandwagon and bask in reflected glory. Rather, she interprets the petty lies as a defensive strategy to avoid the social stigma that comes from being a deviant on value-laden issues. Even though a go-along-to-get-along approach might brand a person as a conformist or a hanger-on, the people responding to her surveys indicate that rejection is even worse.

Banishment from the group, long-term solitary confinement, and sanctioned public ridicule are regarded as cruel punishments in most parts of the world. Noelle-Neumann says that only the criminal or moral hero doesn't care what society thinks. The rest of us want the peace and contentment that come from belonging. Nobel Prize–winner Mother Teresa affirmed Noelle-Neumann's analysis: "The worst sickness is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but the feeling of being respected by no one, of being unloved, deserted by everyone."[8] That's why individuals are constantly trying to assess the climate of public opinion.

THE POWERFUL ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

Noelle-Neumann believes that the media accelerate the muting of the minority in the spiral of silence. Although every human being comes equipped with a quasi-statistical organ with which to analyze the climate of public opinion, that early warning system requires data to process. Direct observation gives us only a small proportion of the information we use; the print and electronic media provide most of our knowledge about the world around us. Marshall McLuhan claimed that different media are extensions of specific physical senses. Noelle-Neumann regards *all* types of media as agents of that hypothetical sixth sense, but she isn't convinced that they always serve us well. That's because opinions supported by the influential media are often overestimated. She suspects that anytime people have a mistaken idea of what the public's opinion really is—a condition called *pluralistic ignorance*—it's probably due to the media not presenting a mix of viewpoints proportionate to their strength in society.[9]

Pluralistic ignorance
People's mistaken idea that everyone thinks like they do.

For decades after the 1940 Erie County voter study, American media sociologists insisted that selective exposure on the part of the reader or viewer neutralized

any persuasive effect that the print and broadcast media might have. Like other European scholars, Noelle-Neumann rejects the view that the media only reinforce preexisting beliefs. She admits that the written word's power to change attitudes may be limited by selective exposure. Given the existing variety of newspapers, magazines, and current events literature, it's quite possible for a reader to avoid contrary opinions. But she thinks television is a different matter: "The effects of mass media increase in proportion to the degree in which selective perception is made difficult."[10] A fabled account of a crooked poker game in a small rural town illustrates her claim.

A farm worker regularly received his wages at the end of the day on Friday. Each week he then walked to the local tavern and lost all his money gambling in a backroom poker game of five-card draw. After a few months a friend took him aside and advised, "Don't play with those guys any more—they're cheating you blind." "Oh I know the game is rigged," the farmhand replied, "but it's the only game in town."

Television is often the only game in town, yet Noelle-Neumann says that media researchers usually fail to recognize that fact. They try to test for media effects in the laboratory, but they can't re-create the "ubiquity, consonance, and cumulation" that give TV its power. She's referring to television's all-surrounding presence, its single point of view, and the constant repetition of its message. These factors override selective exposure, therefore biasing a whole nation's judgment of the prevailing opinion. How powerful does Noelle-Neumann think the broadcast media are?

> I have never found a spiral of silence that goes against the tenor of the media, for the willingness to speak out depends in part upon sensing that there is support and legitimation from the media.[11]

Thus, Noelle-Neumann agrees with Stuart Hall's pessimistic assessment concerning the media's intrusive role in democratic decision making (see Chapter 26). She ascribes a function to the media that goes one step beyond agenda setting (see Chapter 28). The media in general and television in particular not only tell us what to think about but also provide the sanctioned view of what everyone else is thinking.

Given the media's role in crystallizing public opinion, media access becomes crucial for those who desire to shape the public mood. It's no longer enough for potential opinion leaders to have well-thought-out positions and the courage of their convictions. They must be ready, willing, and *able* to command media attention. This gives anybody with an assault rifle, friends in high places, or inherited wealth an advantage over the average citizen in programming the quasi-statistical organ that readers and viewers possess.

As an example of a false consensus promoted by the media, Noelle-Neumann cites the negative attitude of her country's journalists toward the overall German character. In the 1950s and 1960s, commentators consistently bad-mouthed German materialism, rudeness, and love for authority. These and other negative stereotypes permeated the media. Data from her research center show that the continual pounding took its toll. The center's annual survey included an item about the German character: "Generally speaking, what do you consider to be the best qualities of the German?" In 1952 only 4 percent of the people answered, "Don't know of any." That figure rose to 14 percent in 1962. By 1972, 20 percent of the people were unable to voice a single positive trait. Noelle-Neumann concludes

that the mass media can make a majority look like a minority. Television transmits public opinion; television also creates it.

A TIME TO SPEAK AND A TIME TO KEEP SILENT

Since people can tell when they are out of sync with public opinion and they fear being isolated for holding views that aren't in favor, we might expect those who see themselves in the minority to keep silent. This is precisely what Noelle-Neumann predicts:

> Individuals who . . . notice that their own personal opinion is spreading and is taken over by others, will voice this opinion self-confidently in public. On the other hand, individuals who notice that their own opinions are losing ground, will be inclined to adopt a more reserved attitude.[12]

She is not suggesting that the latter group will easily abandon an unpopular conviction and change their minds. People aren't weather vanes. But men and women who realize they are fighting a headwind may duck their heads and keep their own counsel. Their silence will probably pass unnoticed or be taken as tacit agreement, so they won't be hassled. When President George W. Bush declared war on terrorism after 9/11, citizens of the United States who spoke out against the military action in Afghanistan had to be either very brave or very foolish. The situation was different when President Clinton sent American troops into Bosnia. Sensing that public opinion was not in favor of intervention, and that the media would play up the dangers of the mission, people felt free to voice their dissent.

In the first 1988 presidential debate, George Bush, Sr. invoked the "L word." He called Michael Dukakis a liberal—"a card-carrying member of the ACLU," an organization, he noted, that defends atheists, criminals, and child pornographers. Millions of liberals around the country winced at this verbal body blow to their position. Conservatism had been on the rise for over a decade; liberalism had been in retreat. Liberals could have protested that the American Civil Liberties Union also defended conservative patriot Ollie North, or that Bush's positions on social security, Medicare, and relations with China were originally advocated by liberals. But consistent with Noelle-Neumann's prediction, they found it safer to suffer in silence.

The German Public Opinion Research Center has developed a way to find out whether people are willing to speak out in favor of their viewpoint. Suppose, for example, that the topic is abortion. They ask:

> Assume that you have five hours of train or plane travel ahead of you, and somebody [next to you] begins to talk about abortion. Would you like to talk with this person or would you rather not talk?[13]

Train/plane test
A question about conversation with a stranger while traveling, used to determine whether people are willing to speak out in support of their viewpoint.

The *train/plane test* reveals a series of factors that determine the likelihood that people will voice their opinions. The first factor is by far the most important.

1. Those who favor the majority position are more willing to express their views than those who belong to the minority faction. Feeling in harmony with the spirit of the age loosens the tongue.[14]

2. If perception of the present opinion climate doesn't match a person's forecast for the future, willingness to speak out depends more on the future trend.

The book contains a *New Yorker* cartoon here.
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3. People are more willing to speak to those who share their thoughts than to those who disagree. When you fear isolation, friends are safer than foes.

4. Low self-esteem will cause a person to remain mute. Noelle-Neumann's research team identifies these individuals by their agreement with a survey statement about relationships: *I know very few people.*

5. Males, young adults, and people of the middle and upper classes find it easier to speak out.

6. Existing law encourages people to express their opinion when they feel outnumbered. The U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision emboldened "closet pro-choice" women who had been fearing public reprisal.

THE ACCELERATING SPIRAL OF SILENCE

You now have the building blocks that Noelle-Neumann uses to construct her model of public opinion:

Human ability to gauge trends of public sentiment.

Individuals' justifiable fear of isolation.

People's hesitancy to express minority views.

She integrates these factors in the following description of the plight of those who sense minority status. Her summary of the theory reveals that they are indeed caught in a spiral of silence.

People . . . live in perpetual fear of isolating themselves and carefully observe their environment to see which opinions increase and which ones decrease. If they find that their views predominate or increase, then they express themselves freely in public; if they find that their views are losing supporters, then they become fearful, conceal their convictions in public and fall silent. Because the one group express themselves with self-confidence whereas the others remain silent, the former appear to be strong in public, the latter weaker than their numbers suggest. This encourages others to express themselves or to fall silent, and a spiral process comes into play.[15]

Figure 29–1 pictures the journey of minority factions down the spiral of silence. The ball represents people who sense a slight discrepancy between their position and the prevailing public opinion, much like President Jimmy Carter's supporters in the early fall of 1980. Up to this point they feel comfortable expressing their views in public, perhaps even displaying campaign buttons or bumper stickers. But then the nagging fear of isolation—insistent as the pull of gravity—convinces them to be more circumspect in what they say. Bumper stickers disappear, and they avoid arguments with Reaganites. Carter hasn't lost any voting strength; only the outward fervor has tapered off. However, the Republican clamor for Reagan is undiminished, so Carter backers get the impression of a dip in support for their man.
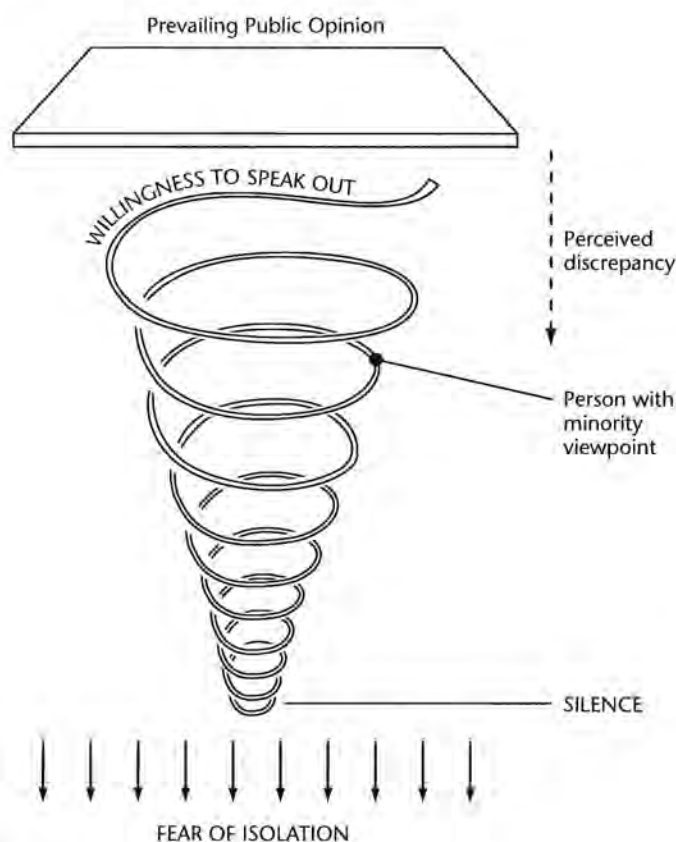

FIGURE 29–1 The Downward Spiral of Silence

Carter's people have now come full circle. Their political antennae register a relative shift in public sentiment even before it shows up in the polls. Reagan's apparent strength becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because it causes Democrats to see a widening gap between themselves and the majority opinion. To an even greater degree, they draw back from public scrutiny and, thus, begin a tighter circuit on the accelerating downward spiral toward silence. The greater the perceived discrepancy between the prevailing public opinion and their own viewpoint, the more they feel the force of society's demand that they give in. Finally, the pressure to conform becomes so great that uncommitted voters and wavering Democrats who are most fearful of isolation switch sides. The result is a surprising (but predictable) landslide for Ronald Reagan.

THE HARD CORE AND AVANT-GARDE: HOLDOUTS WHO CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Early critics of the spiral of silence pointed out that there are people who will never be silenced. Even though their cause appears hopeless, they continue to voice their opinions. Noelle-Neumann now describes two types of individuals who form this vocal minority that remains at the top of the spiral in defiance of threats of isolation. She calls them the *hard core* and the *avant-garde*.

Hard-core nonconformists are those who "have been overpowered and relegated to a completely defensive position in public."[16] Already beaten down, they have nothing to lose by speaking out. Noelle-Neumann cites Cervantes' Don Quixote as an example. The man from La Mancha tilts at windmills and "finds himself isolated, laughed at, defeated, and yet he remains true to the ideals of chivalry" that belong to a world that hasn't existed for 200 years.[17] People in the hard core cling to the past and regard isolation as the price they have to pay.

Hard-core nonconformists
People who have already been rejected for their beliefs and have nothing to lose by speaking out.

The avant-garde are the intellectuals, artists, and reformers who form the vanguard of new ideas. Unlike the hard core, they seek public response, even though it's usually negative. "Those who belong to the avant-garde are committed to the future and thus by necessity, are also isolated; but their conviction that they are ahead of their time enables them to endure."[18] Although Noelle-Neumann acknowledges the reality of hard-core and avant-garde minorities, they are not predicted by her spiral of silence. In that sense they represent boundary conditions that stake out when the theory applies and when it doesn't.

Avant-garde
Intellectuals, artists, and reformers in the isolated minority who speak out because they are convinced they are ahead of the times.

Noelle-Neumann regards the hard-core and avant-garde minorities as the only hope for future swings in public sentiment.

> The chance to change or mold public opinion is reserved to those who are not afraid of being isolated. By saying and doing the unpopular, by shocking, they . . . can carry their ideas to supremacy.[19]

French social psychologist Serge Moscovici agrees with Noelle-Neumann's assessment, but he doesn't believe she does justice to the pervasive impact of committed deviants upon public opinion. Moscovici has spent his professional life explaining how opinions and attitudes of the majority are susceptible to change by the influence of a minority that stands firm. He considers Noelle-Neumann's discussion of the hard core and the avant-garde as an afterthought, or "finagle factor," to cover the times when the main features of her theory fail to account for shifts in the public mood.[20]

CRITIQUE: FATAL FLAWS IN MAPPING THE SPIRAL?

University of Chicago sociologist Mihaly Csikszentmihal regards Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence as "the most original, comprehensive, and useful" theory of public opinion yet proposed.[21] Despite this praise, he and other scholars raise serious questions about three specific research practices that they consider overly simplistic, or simply wrong.

1.   Assuming that fear of isolation is the cause of people's silence. Noelle-Neumann bases her spiral of silence on people's fear of isolation, yet her extensive survey work seldom questions whether individuals who remain silent feel it more than those who speak out. This is similar to the practice of Leon Festinger and his followers, who assume that people change their attitudes in order to reduce cognitive dissonance but never check to see if they are actually experiencing that noxious feeling (see Chapter 16). Noelle-Neumann's reliance on the Asch conformity experiment to prove her point also seems questionable. When participants in that study had just one "true partner" who shared their judgment, they were able to withstand group pressure. Undoubtedly some people tend to remain mute more than others, but that reticence might be due to shyness, disinterest, or a desire not to embarrass a person with an opposing viewpoint.

2.   Relying on the hypothetical train/plane test to measure willingness to speak out. Although Noelle-Neumann's train/plane test seems to be a clever way to assess people's enthusiasm or reluctance to share their opinions with others, the artificial nature of the question may trigger answers that don't reflect what people do or don't do in typical conversations. Cornell University communication professor Carroll Glynn and two colleagues performed a meta-analysis of 17 studies that correlated people's perception of support for their opinion with their stated willingness to speak out in a train-test type of situation. The minuscule correlation ($r = .05$) gave scant confidence of any meaningful connection. Although the researchers aren't ready to dismiss the theory, they conclude that "future research on the spiral of silence should concentrate on observations of actual willingness to speak out as opposed to hypothetical willingness."[22]

3.   Focusing on national climate rather than reference group opinion. Noelle-Neumann insists that public opinion is what we perceive to be the judgment of *strangers in an anonymous public;* that's the force that constrains what we say.[23] Critics counter that the apparent mood of the nation exerts less pressure than do the attitudes of family, friends, and other reference groups. For example, consider the ostracizing force that a few devout evangelicals or Roman Catholics in the United States might fear within their church fellowship if they took a public pro-choice stance on abortion. The fact that legalized abortion is the law of the land and that a majority of Americans support *Roe v. Wade* wouldn't temper the threat. A recent study of attitudes toward affirmative action suggests that it's "perceptions of opinion in the 'micro-climate' of one's family and friends that are most closely linked to one's willingness to speak out."[24]

Do these flaws isolate Noelle-Neumann within the field of communication or render her theory invalid? Definitely not, but the criticisms do suggest the wisdom of changing the research paradigm for testing its predictions. A recent

study conducted by Dietram Scheufele, a communication professor at Cornell University, addressed these three major flaws in spiral of silence inquiry. While sampling perceptions of public opinion toward biotechnology, his research team measured fear of isolation—treating it as a variable to be tested rather than assuming it was present. They also determined willingness to speak out through participants' responses to a real-life invitation to join a focus group discussing the pros and cons of biotech gene manipulation. And finally, the researchers questioned participants about prior conversations they might have had about the topic with people in their reference groups. With these corrective procedures in place, perception of public opinion proved to be a much better predictor of willingness to speak out than had been seen in the 17 survey studies referred to earlier.[25] The spiral of silence is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Noelle-Neumann is not surprised when her theory pans out. In addition to her own survey research, she has culled the writings of philosophers and social historians to assemble evidence to support her theory. She draws upon the insights of Enlightenment thinkers Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Goethe, and James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* to illustrate the force and consolidation of public opinion. She found that Alexis de Tocqueville, in his nineteenth-century analysis of the decline of religion before the French Revolution, was probably the first to describe the entire spiraling process:

> People still clinging to the old faith were afraid of being the only ones who did so, and as they were more frightened of isolation than of committing an error, they joined the masses even though they did not agree with them. In this way, the opinion of only part of the population seemed to be the opinion of all and everybody, and exactly for this reason seemed irresistible to those who were responsible for this deceptive appearance.[26]

But just as compelling are the words that nonconformist Henry David Thoreau wrote about his own civil disobedience: "It is always easy to break the law, but even the Bedouins in the desert find it impossible to resist public opinion."[27]

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Noelle-Neumann writes that *public opinions are attitudes or behaviors one must express in public if one is not to isolate oneself.* What basic assumptions of her theory are embedded in this description?

2. According to Noelle-Neumann, under what conditions is our *quasi-statistical sixth sense* uncannily correct? When is it prone to lead us into *pluralistic ignorance?*

3. Based on Noelle-Neumann's *train/plane test,* under what circumstances would you expect it likely that a person would remain silent about a controversial issue?

4. On a *controversial moral issue,* have you ever been part of a small vocal minority that didn't *spiral into silence?* Which term best describes you as you spoke out? (a) hard core (b) avant-garde (c) shameless (d) clueless

A SECOND LOOK

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Chapter 28: Agenda-Setting Theory

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