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## The ‘Spiral of Silence’ on Social Media

***Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms did not provide new outlets for the discussion of the Snowden-NSA revelations and people who thought their social media friends disagreed with them were less likely to discuss the issues in face-to-face gatherings, as well as online forums***

(Washington) – Despite hopes that social media like Facebook and Twitter might provide new places for the discussion of political issues and the sharing of different opinions, a new survey has found that people were *less willing* to discuss one such issue – revelations by Edward Snowden about the U.S. government’s surveillance programs – in social media than they were in person.

Fully 86% of Americans were willing to have an in-person conversation about the issues surrounding the National Security Agency’s surveillance program, but just 42% of Facebook and Twitter users were willing to post about it on those platforms.

Moreover, Facebook and Twitter users were less likely than others to be willing to share their opinions in many face-to-face settings and were especially reluctant to speak their minds during in-person gatherings if they thought their social media friends and followers disagreed with them.

“It has been well documented since before the internet that a ‘spiral of silence’ descends when people think their opinions are in the minority when compared to those around them – they don’t want to speak out if they think they hold unpopular views,” noted Prof. Keith Hampton, a key author of this study. “This kind of self-censoring can mean that important information is never shared. Some had hoped that social media might provide new outlets that encourage more discussion and the exchange of a wider range of opinions. But we see the opposite – a spiral of silence exists online, too. If people did not think that their friends and followers in social media agreed with them, they were less likely to say they would state their views online. In addition, if they felt that they were in the minority opinion amongst those who follow them through social media, they were also less willing to join a discussion in in-person situations, such as gatherings of friends or co-workers. This raises the possibility that the spiral of silence spills over from online contexts to in-person contexts.”

A survey of 1,801 adults shortly after Edward Snowden first leaked details about the NSA collection of metadata from emails and phone calls found that social media did not provide an alternative discussion platform for those who were not willing to discuss the story in-person. Of the 14% of Americans unwilling to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in person with others, only 0.3% were willing to post about it on social media. With rare exception, those who were unwilling to join a discussion about this issue in person at a public meeting, at gatherings with family, friends or co-workers, were also not willing to do so online.

The survey did not probe why people would be reluctant to speak out if they thought their social media friends and followers disagreed with them.

“The traditional argument is that the spiral of silence results from a fear of being ostracized or criticized by others. One possible explanation is that social media users are more aware of the diversity of opinions around them – especially on an issue where there is divided opinion,” noted Lee Rainie of the Pew Research Center. “Because they use social media, they may know more about the depth of disagreement over the issue in their wide circle of contacts. This might make them hesitant to speak up either online or offline for fear of starting an argument, offending or even losing a friend.”

The researchers performed statistical analyses to control for whether people use social media and how they use it, including such things as gender, age, education levels, race, and marital status. That modeling allowed the researchers to calculate how likely people were to be willing to express their views in differing settings holding other things constant.

The results of this analyses show that, even holding other factors such as age constant, social media users are less likely than others to say they would join a discussion about the Snowden-NSA revelations.

- The typical Facebook user – someone who logs onto the site a few times per day – is half as likely to be willing to have a discussion about the Snowden-NSA issues at a physical public meeting as a non-Facebook user.
- Similarly, the typical Twitter user – someone who uses the site a few times per day – is one quarter as likely to be willing to share their opinions in the workplace as an internet user who does not use Twitter.

This analysis also revealed that when social media users felt their opinions were not supported online, they were less likely to say they would speak their minds. This was true not only in social media spaces, but also in the physical presence of others.

- The average Facebook user (someone who uses the site a few times per day) was half as likely as other people to say they would be willing to voice their opinion with friends at a restaurant. If they felt that their online Facebook network agreed with their views on this issue, their willingness to speak out in a face-to-face discussion with friends was higher, although they were still only 0.74 times as likely to voice their opinion.
- The typical Twitter user (who uses the site a few times per day) is 0.24 times as likely to share their opinions with colleagues at work as an internet user who does not use Twitter. However, Twitter users who felt that their online Twitter followers shared their opinion were less reserved: They were only 0.66 times less likely to speak up than other internet users.

### **People also say they would speak up, or stay silent, under specific conditions.**

In addition to exploring the impact of agreement/disagreement on whether people were willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA revelations, we asked about other factors that might shape whether people would speak out, even if they suspected they held minority views. This survey shows how the social and political climate in which people share opinions depends on several other things:

- Their confidence in how much they know. Those who felt they knew a lot about the issues were more likely than others to say they would join conversations.

- The intensity of their opinions. Those who said they had strong feelings about the Snowden-NSA matter were more willing than those with less-intense feelings to talk about the subject.
- Their level of interest. Those who said they were very interested in the Snowden-NSA story were more likely than those who were not as interested to express their opinions.

### **About this Survey**

This report contains findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,801 American adults (ages 18+) conducted by the Pew Research Center and fielded August 7-September 16, 2013 by Princeton Research Associates International. It was conducted in English and Spanish on landline (N=901) and cell phones (N=900). The margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus 2.6 percentage points. Some 1,076 respondents are users of social networking sites and the margin of error for that subgroup is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points.

For the full survey, go to <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/08/26/social-media-and-the-spiral-of-silence/>