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Muting the masses: Effects of the spiral of silence in the college newsroom

Blaire Ritter

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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MUTING THE MASSES: EFFECTS OF THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE IN THE
COLLEGE NEWSROOM

by

Blaire Anna Lacey Ritter

Bachelor of Arts
Gonzaga University
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Daniel Stout, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Gary Larson, Ph.D., Committee Member

Larry Mullen, Ph.D., Committee Member

David Dickens, Ph.D., Graduate College Representative

Tom Piechota, Ph.D., Interim Vice President for Research &
Dean of the Graduate College

May 2013

ABSTRACT

Muting the masses: Effects of the spiral of silence on the college newsroom

by

Blaire Anna Lacey Ritter

Dr. Daniel Stout Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Journalism & Media Studies
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This paper explores whether or not Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory, the spiral of silence, is an accurate theoretical lens to examine the issues of censorship and conflict in the student broadcast newsroom. Using data collected from classroom observations and student interviews, levels of involuntary and voluntary censorship and editorial control were examined to see if they played a role in classroom dynamic and editorial decisions. Each instance was looked at to see if it fit five criteria; a threat of isolation by peers or community, a fear of this threat, a willingness to speak out by the majority, a quasi-statistical sense to gauge what is majority opinion, and a pluralistic ignorance by that incorrectly labeled a certain belief as the majority opinion, all of which are described in Noelle-Neumann's original research.

The literature reviewed examines the development of the spiral of silence in the classroom, reasons for omission, avoidance strategies, the role of academic freedom, and the effects on students who are not encouraged to participate. The existing research builds off Noelle-Neumann's hypothesis that a fear of isolation from one's peers is the main motivator behind student's lack of participation in class discussion. Students fear that they will be ridiculed by their classmates for either speaking out against the teacher or the majority opinion of the class. Their perceived minority opinion makes them

second-guess themselves and feel inadequate amongst their peers. This increased insecurity causes them to withdraw from the class more and more, causing a downward spiral of participation. In addition to looking at research through the five criteria of the spiral of silence, social impact theory and Normative Social Influence were also used as supplemental material.

Overall, the ethnographic research and interview responses aim to provide a preliminary base for a study looking at the spiral of silence in the newsroom, as many qualities and effects of this theory transfer from the classroom to the professional newsroom environment. This research also provides a base for future educational studies that specifically look at improving classroom communication and participation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2 SUBJECT BACKGROUND.....	4
CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
CHAPTER 4 GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	20
CHAPTER 5 METHODS.....	21
CHAPTER 6 RESULTS & DISCUSSION.....	27
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION.....	47
APPENDIX.....	50
REFERENCES.....	51
VITA.....	54

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether or not the spiral of silence theory is applicable to understanding censorship, both involuntary and voluntary, within the college broadcasting newsroom.

The theory of the spiral of silence emerged in the 1970s and is primarily used in the analysis of media coverage during political elections. In addition to Noelle-Neumann's fear of isolation theory, she suggests that every person has a "quasistatistical ability" that instinctively picks up on public opinion in any venue (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 25). The public can "sense a climate of opinion without public opinion research, that they virtually have an 'opinion organ,' capable of registering the most minute changes" (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, p. 147).

Most spiral of silence studies focus on using different methodologies to test Noelle-Neumann's theory within the same venue of political elections. What they do not take into account is that it can happen on a much smaller, but equally impactful, scale in a college broadcasting newsroom. College students are just as equipped with this "quasistatistical ability" to gauge the tone of public opinion on campus. The few studies that specifically address this theory within the college venue believe that well-rounded students "should be exposed to multiple sides of the story, not just one side" (Harvell, 2007, p.10). Ideally, "colleges and universities are mechanisms meant to give students information to make their own decisions, not force their political beliefs on their students" (Harvell, 2007, p. 13).

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. The spiral of silence is an issue that

affects the ability of student reporters and editors to stand up against the administration or to one another in order to educate the public on minority opinions, whether the subject be politics, religion or another topic of equal importance. The fear of isolation by a biased adviser, other outspoken staff or peer pressure prevents the student from sharing his or her ideas about important content and contributing valuable thoughts during content and story meetings. This omission not only hinders staff productivity, but the education of the student body as a whole. As a result, students are only exposed to majority opinions and not given enough information to make educated decisions about campus issues.

In order to prevent the spiral of silence, media professors, employees and advisers need to fully understand the connection between the conditions that create the spiral of silence and its aftermath. However, with the exception of a few case studies on isolated censorship issues on college campuses, there is little written on the spiral of silence in the college broadcasting newsroom. Within this paper, the limited literature on this specific venue is supplemented with studies that focus on political discourse in the college classroom, which is a similar venue to the college broadcasting newsroom, as both venues should ideally foster unbiased learning and discussion. The few studies that do apply this theory within the college environment usually focus on one or two factors. All the studies agree that the cornerstone for all research should be on what Jane Henson refers to as the “perceived political and ideological congruence between the instructor, student and peers. Political affiliation and ideological stance rest on a spectrum. Congruence is the degree to which students’ perceived similarity in party attachment and ideological stance with that of the instructor” (Henson, 2007, p. 10). When applying this to the broadcasting newsroom, this congruency refers to the similarity between which

content student editors want featured in the daily broadcast and content that the university administration wants shown. This congruency determines which story packages the student staff can and should broadcast and whether or not differing opinions cause intimidation. From this topic, the studies branch out to various major and minor topics. A comprehensive view shows that the most important factors are how the spiral develops, reasons for omission, avoidance strategies, the role of free speech and the effects on college education when presenting biased or one-sided information to students.

By conducting an ethnographic study and qualitative interviews with an upper division broadcast college class, conclusions can be drawn as to whether or not the spiral of silence is a valid theory to apply to censorship, both voluntary or involuntary, within the college newsroom. Despite the limited content on this topic, it is important to address the spiral of silence within this demographic, because the college news broadcast is an equally valid form of media and should be held to the ethical standards of the mainstream media outlets. The importance of understanding and framing this censorship is to educate university faculty and staff on how to maintain an unbiased, effective discourse within the newsroom and create an unbiased environment, or safe space, for the student news staff to voice their opinions. This includes how to deal with withdrawn and outspoken students, how to use differing opinions to encourage thinking rather than hinder it and how to handle intimidation and peer pressure between students. Ultimately, the conclusions drawn through these interviews and the analysis of past research will help enrich the students' college experiences, allowing them to cultivate their ideas from unbiased outlets and get a well-rounded education.

CHAPTER 2

SUBJECT BACKGROUND

The class under observation for this study was an upper division broadcast class taught at a large university in the Southwest region of the United States. The class consisted of students who were taking the class for the first time and students who elected to take the course again to gain more broadcast experience. The returning students, or retreads as they were commonly referred to by the professor and peers, elected to retake the class by choice, not because they had failed during a prior semester of the course. The term “retreads” was not meant derogatorily and used as a common term in the class vernacular. Broadcast students could take this class as many times as they chose.

This course was selected, because it is the advanced version of the three broadcast courses offered as the production part of the journalism curriculum. It is assumed that all students know the fundamentals of broadcasting (i.e. how to run a camera, what the defined roles in the newsroom are, etc) and that the class would focus more on creating and editing broadcasting packages rather than reviewing the fundamentals of broadcast production.

According to the class syllabus, students will learn to “produce daily, professional-quality television and Internet news stories and programs,” (Syllabus, 2012, p. 2) Students are graded on show production, story production, attendance and demo reel production.

The class is divided into three, five-week sections. The first five weeks center around getting students acclimated with the studio resources and equipment. Students will also start to shoot field packages and rehearse for live broadcasts by this time as

well. The second five-week section starts the actual production schedule. Students will produce daily shows for a live, streaming broadcast.

During production, students will rotate daily in and out of a variety of different roles. The student director of the day will be responsible for creating a personalized “look and feel” for the show as well as selecting classmates to fill the roles of graphics/CG, audio, video, prompter, camera operators and stage manager. The student producer will help monitor scripts, work with reporters, confirm interviews and time shows. The student tech director makes sure all graphics are correct and will switch the show. Lastly, the student anchors will host the daily broadcast.

After production, these daily shows are discussed and critiqued by peers, the graduate student news director and the course professor. Daily editorial sessions are also held after each newscast. During these sessions, students will discuss future story ideas. The news director will then approve these story ideas and angles prior to air. All scripts and stories must be approved by the news director and instructor prior to editing and then reviewed after editing. These daily meetings, both the critiques and editorial sessions, will provide the bulk of the observations for this thesis project.

Finally, during the last five weeks of the course, students will continue to produce material for their daily broadcasts in addition to creating their own demo reel. These demo reels will be graded on “story production, professionalism in work and outlook, willingness to learn facets of...facilities and equipment on their own time, and their progress toward creation of a demo reel for job prospectus,” (Syllabus, 2012, p. 3).

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review focuses on case studies that address the spiral of silence within political classroom discussion and the college newsroom. To date, there is little research on the presence and possible effects of the spiral of silence in the student broadcast newsroom. Thus, this venue was supplemented with studies that focus on the spiral of silence in the college classroom. The literature is grouped into the main topics of how the spiral of silence develops within the classroom and newsroom, reasons for staff omission including the overall university influence, avoidance strategies, the role of free speech, and the effects of censorship when it comes to educating the viewers who watch the daily broadcast. All sources written by Noelle-Neumann and secondary articles and studies were retrieved through the university library or Academic Search Premiere database.

All the sources examined agree that the spiral of silence develops in the classroom out of a fear of isolation from peers and professors. Noelle-Neumann states that “as social beings, most people are afraid of becoming isolated from their environment. They would like to be popular and respected” (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, p. 145). Thus, the need to maintain one’s friendships and peer-respect takes precedence over voicing one’s opinion. Humans crave respect and will do anything, including conform to perceived majority opinion, to attain and maintain it. While in college, this quest for respect is one of the most powerful forces that contribute to the development of a student. Peer interaction “and student’s perceived groups status can have consequences for a student’s self-esteem, attitudes towards school work, and academic achievement. Student’s

academic performance is conditioned by self concepts that were then influenced by friendships and relations with classmates” (Henson, 2007, p. 6). Essentially, life revolves around how one is perceived by his or her peers. These perceptions dictate how one will dress, act, and communicate in social and academic settings. When one is deemed popular by peers, that person will avoid anything that jeopardizes this social standing, including speaking his or her mind.

In her dissertation “Political bias: A look into the college classroom,” Lindsay Harvell takes this fear of isolation one step further by discussing how it is triggered by absorbing the opinions discussed in college classrooms. She argues that the spiral of silence develops based on whether or not students are willing to listen to opinions other than their own. Within a classroom political discussion, students are exposed to the ideas of their peers and professors, causing them to rethink their ideas. This rethinking leads to second-guessing knowledge and creates immense intellectual insecurity. While this exposure to new ideas is meant to expand a student’s knowledge base, college students become so paralyzed by the fear of isolation that it creates the spiral of silence. They do “process the information” but not the “willingness to speak out” (Harvell, 2007, p. 23). The spiral starts out as a student quietly acknowledges that these ideas are different from his own. This omission grows if one differing opinion gains positive momentum. This becomes the class-dubbed majority, and all differing opinions are silenced. In the end, the student fears that speaking up with a minority opinion will make him look inferior to his classmates and professor. Harvell concludes that this is not the case, but that the fear keeps the students from seeing the larger, positive picture. In her research she concludes that “students, may fear their peers, and choose not to speak, the reality is their

classmates respect those that speak out instead of resenting them. If the students are made aware that they are respected when they speak out, they might be more apt to speak out in the future therefore working against the spiral of silence” (Harvell, 2007, p. 30). This idea on the development of the spiral of silence prompts exploration into the idea of promoting respect within the classroom.

The article “Self-censorship limits student reporting” corroborates Noelle-Neumann’s isolation theory as well as Harvell’s differing opinions research. The author concludes that the spiral of silence is started when “some factors, like self-interest, fear of retribution and a climate of fear, precipitate self-censorship, which causes people to shut down when controversy occurs” (*St. Louis Journalism Review*, 2009, p. 4). Similar to the classroom setting, student editors and reporters fear isolation from peers and anticipate ridicule if they express an opinion contrary to the majority. When in-staff or administrative problems arise, these editors and reporters might silently agree with the majority and practice self-censorship of their own work as to prevent firing or ridicule. The students’ agreement by omission then leads to biased reporting and coverage within the student broadcast. Over time, a climate of tension and fear is created, which only intensifies the fear of isolation on staff and spiral of silence within the newsroom.

From the development of the spiral of silence, Harvell focuses her discussion on the various reasons for omission. Her study focuses on two main reasons. The first is a student’s perceived lack of political knowledge (Harvell, 2007, p. 36). After hearing other classmates’ opinions, a student might feel insecure about his own political knowledge. He considers himself to be inferior within the discussion therefore choosing not to participate. This inferiority can even paralyze the student if he agrees with the

majority opinion. This student thinks that if he speaks out, his lack of knowledge will show and his professors and peers will ridicule him. Harvell notes that his insecurity may even motivate him to take it to the extreme of not listening to the conversation, thus not learning through the discussion.

The second reason for omission Harvell discusses is the fear of grades being altered. Essentially, students fear that if they do not share the same opinion as their professor or peers, then their grades will be lowered. Student's who do hold opinions different from the class majority will choose not to participate in class political discussions, because they do not want their opinions to have an adverse affect on their overall grades in the course. Harvell also ties this fear in with her previous reason for omission. Students might think that their lack of political knowledge will reflect poorly on final grades. Once again, they do not want their inferiority to show and be solely evaluated on their lack of political knowledge when the course ends.

Both of Harvell's reasons for omission are related to the spiral of silence in the newsroom. However when switching venues, one must account for slight differences. Instead of students feeling insecure about only their political knowledge, student editors and reporters might question their ability to edit broadcast packages, write journalistically, their knowledge about a particular story or their ability to effectively manage a newsroom (Young, 2002, p. A36). Like feeling insecure about political knowledge in a classroom, these students feel that their lack of journalistic or managerial skills will instigate ridicule amongst professors and students and jeopardize their future careers in the media. In order to prevent this, less confident students partake in the spiral of silence in order to hide his or her insecurities.

Similarly, in addition to the lowering of one's grade as suggested by Harvell, the student reporter would fear losing his or her job on staff (Young, 2002, p. A36). This might include being demoted from on-air personality to camera operator during a particular broadcast. The student would essentially lose a coveted job amongst peers only to receive menial or basic newsroom tasks. A student might think that if he or she speaks out against the staff or the administration, then he or she might get fired or demoted for voicing a minority opinion. Once again, the student practices self-censorship to protect his or her status and prevent isolation from peers and faculty.

In her essay "I'm a Republican, but Please Don't Tell: An Application of Spiral of Silence Theory to Perceptions of Classroom Climate," Jayne Henson expands Harvell's idea that students fear the lowering of their grades to overall fear of ridicule from the professor. This fear, she claims, stems from different opinions held by the professor and select students. She writes "When the student is aware of a difference between the views they hold and the view they perceive their instructors to hold, there is a greater likelihood of being silenced in the classroom" (Henson, 2007, p. 12). Students might take the professor's word as authority and decipher it as the political tone for the discussion. If a student disagrees with the professor, he might not want to be ridiculed by the professor and does not speak up. Differences in student and instructor views "can lead to marginalizing and silencing of other world views...this silencing has tremendous implications for a student's identity and world view" (Henson, 2007, p. 13). If only one perception is shared, the students will receive an inaccurate view of world politics and culture. This stunts their knowledge growth and keeps them from making necessary connections between different cultures. Overall, this silence could also be a

precautionary measure to ensure Harvell's mentioned fear of lowering one's grade.

Omission is also enforced by outside media focus as well. In his article "Peer and social influence on opinion expression: Combining the theories of planned behavior and the spiral of silence," Kurt Neuwirth writes that people "observe the media for cues about the majority's position on debatable issues of the day...as the open expression of opinions declines, the rarity of these viewpoints shifts peoples' estimates of prevailing opinion, prompting others to refrain from divulging their opinions when given the chance, thus contributing to an ever-expanding spiraling process" (Neuwirth, 2004, p. 699). The issues covered by the media also dictate what is talked about in university newsroom. Noelle-Neumann claims "what gives rise to these requirements is...the confidence journalists feel in knowing what will secure the public's attention" (Noelle-Neumann 1979, p. 150). The media or political agenda plays out into the college newsroom, because these select news stories are what the students are being exposed to. This information forms their political knowledge, which they contribute to new content for future issues of the student paper or broadcast. The perceived public opinion sets the tone for bias in the content. Students, and sometimes professors, muffle their opinions to fit the larger public majority. This is an example of how fear of isolation happens at the larger scale and filters down into niches like classroom discussions and college newsroom.

Stemming from reasons of omission, recognizing avoidance strategies is the next component needed to develop conclusions about how to prevent the spiral of silence in the college newsroom. In his journal article "Exploring the forms of self-censorship: On the spiral of silence and the use of opinion expression avoidance strategies," Andrew F.

Hayes discusses these strategies and dealing with them in conversation. Despite not contextualizing his study within the newsroom, he offers valuable insight into avoidance strategies people use when refraining from voicing their opinion in a hostile environment. His study “revealed a variety of different strategies people report they would use to censor their own opinion expression, such as expressing indifference or ambivalence, trying to change the subject, or reflecting the question back without answering it” (Hayes, 2007, p. 795). He argues that once people can identify these strategies, it is easy to disarm them and turn a hostile working environment, specifically the college newsroom, into a friendly one. Ultimately, by combating these strategies, students and professors can encourage differing opinions and stop the problem of the spiral of silence before it biases the college newsroom.

The most common avoidance strategy identified in the literature reviewed is “saving face.” The idea of “saving face” can be applied on the larger scale to Harvell’s overall reasons for omission as well. Hayes writes “the spiral of silence is fueled in part by face work as we avoid expressing our disagreements to maintain the positive face of ourselves and our interaction partners and steer our conversation away from topics that are likely to result in threats to our own or others’ positive face” (Hayes, 2007, p. 796). Students of all races practice “saving face” in a classroom setting. This need to save “face,” or one’s reputation, transcends ethnicity and filters into the aforementioned issues of personal insecurity, dealing with the culture gap, fearing ridicule by peers and teachers and the idea of altering grades. It stems from the needed respect from peers that takes priority over expressing opinion.

However, students are not the only ones who partake in these avoidance

strategies. Sometimes professors omit their opinions in order to get minority students to speak up in class discussion. Michael Parenti notes in his article “The Myth of the Liberal Campus” that “faculty usually think twice about introducing a controversial politico-economic perspective into their classrooms. On some campuses, administration officials have monitored classes, questioned the political content of books and films, and screened the lists of campus guest speakers” (Parenti, 1995, p. 21). The idea of professors omitting their opinions reflects back to the idea of “saving face.” However, not only are the professors trying to save their reputation amongst their peers and students, they are trying not to offend anyone by bringing up controversial topics. The spiral of silence is not only brought into the classroom through media influence and repercussions of a fear of isolation, but continues outside the classroom through the sheltering of students within these discussions. Students learn by example, and if censorship is the example that is being displayed, then they are likely to continue this practice of self-censorship further on in life. By censoring their opinions, professors are only continuing the spiral of silence.

This faculty omission can also be seen in the college newsroom when it comes to story selection and staff meetings. While trying to “save face” and not offend readers or administration, newsroom faculty subtly censor students. The author of the *St. Louis Journalism Review* notes that censorship “can be couched in the simplest decisions, such as encouraging a student to find a better story as opposed to one that might cause controversy or asking the student ‘Are you sure you’ve got your facts straight?’” (*St. Louis Journalism Review*, 2009, p.5). Faculty subtly censors student broadcast content through what would seem to be constructive advice. The editor or reporter might not

even see these common suggestions as censorship. However, by following these subtle hints, the student is practicing self-censorship and the spiral of silence within the newsroom.

Faculty omission is specifically addressed within the debate about the role of academic freedom and the Academic Bill of Rights as well. Critics argue that by setting the example of omission, professors are jeopardizing the unbiased, ideal education. In his article “Political Bias in Undergraduate Education,” Thomas Ehrlich writes “the role of scholarship is seen to include representing the perspectives of the powerless...it is important for academic leaders, including faculty, to protect the academic freedom of students who wish to challenge the prevailing views within their classroom or institution” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 38). By setting the example of omission, professors are doing the exact opposite of this goal. They are encouraging students to participate in the spiral of silence, rather than to expand their knowledge by thinking about all sides of a political issue and applying it to other subjects.

The Academic Bill of Rights also clashes with the role of free speech on college campuses. Ideally, each student paper should have “Full freedom in research and public action, unless monetary gain is involved,” “freedom in the classroom, given that the content of the speech relates to subject,” and “freedom of speech, with additional expectations of a professional, including accuracy, restraint, respect for others’ opinions, and a clear acknowledgement that one’s views do not represent those of the institution” (Travis, 2000, p. 815). However, in some cases, “although free speech is a constitutional right, academic freedom is a contractual right. Considering that private institutions are not necessarily subject to the Constitution in matters of free speech...private colleges

clearly describe limitations to academic freedom in writing at the time of a faculty member's appointment. Many institutions have...(given) this definition of academic freedom the full authority of law" (Travis, 2000, p. 812). These contractual clauses that give academic freedom more power than free speech make it legal for faculty to censor the content of student publications. After dealing with an extreme case of censorship at the Governor's State University student paper, *The Innovator*, the managing editor said "We told [university administrators] they were breaking the law, and they did not care. The Constitution means something to us. People have given their lives for these rights, and the thing that really [bothers] me is that the university violated the Constitution" (Young, 2002, p. A36). When censorship is practiced, students and faculty are stripped of their right to speak out against controversial issues and college policy, therefore being forced to silence their minority opinions. Student editors and reporters can cover events and issues just so long as they fall into line with the university's belief and policy system. Essentially, administrators use academic freedom to disregard free speech and create the spiral of silence in on-campus publications and broadcasts.

The last important topic that the few newsroom spiral of silence studies touched on was the effects on the paper and its readers. In an extreme case of censorship at Governor's State University, university officials changed the locks on the student newspaper offices, read the newspaper's emails and deleted some, and called the paper's printer and requested that a university administrator be notified when the paper arrived so that the paper could be reviewed for content before it went to press. The dean also ordered the printer not to print the paper until an administrator signed off on it (Young, 2002, p. A36). On the university level, editors, both print and broadcast, are ideally

supposed to be the watchdogs that keep the administration honest. With these types of censorship in place, editors are forced to report inaccuracies and remain silent against biased university judgment. On the public level, this censorship perpetuates the spiral of silence and ignorance from the newsroom into the readership community. By taking these measures, administrative officials are not allowing the student news media to achieve its overall goal of educating its readers with unbiased information.

While the predominant focus of this research is on the spiral of silence and its impact on social interaction within the student newsroom, it's important to look at other theories that might be applicable to the same situation. Another theory that addresses majority-minority dynamic, conformity and individual response within a social group is the Social Impact Theory developed largely by Bibb Latané. Within his research, Latané examined how various social responses are affected by the actions of other people within the same group. Specifically he looked at group size and intensity of response in staged situations that emphasized embarrassment, news impact, emergency response, humor, conformity, persuasion, etc. Like the spiral of silence, social impact theory looks at the effects of other people on an individual.

Latané's theory is characterized by three rules. First, social impact, or the effect of a group of people on an individual, is determined by that group's strength and immediacy (Latané, 1981, p. 344). If the majority of a large group, like a college class of students, exerts the popular opinion strongly, then the student or students who disagree are more likely to feel embarrassed, omit their opinions and/or conform to the majority opinion of the class. These reactions are intensified by the immediacy of the issue at hand and the persistence of the majority to share the popular opinion.

The second rule states that individual reaction (i.e. conformity, embarrassment, etc.) increases as the group's size gets larger (Latané, 1981, p. 347). For example, if a large audience is watching a play and the actor forgets his lines, the actor's stage fright and embarrassment will increase because he is performing in front of a large crowd. If the crowd were smaller, the impact of embarrassment would not be as great on the performer. Latané's research concluded that individual response directly relates to the size of the group the individual belongs to and the expectations of this group.

Building off this individual-group relationship, social impact theory's third rule is that the group impact on the individual lessens when more people are targeted, or affected, by the majority opinion (Latané, 1981, p. 351). If more than one person suffers embarrassment or finds themselves in the minority, the impact of the majority will lessen. The effect of the group is diluted as the number of target individuals increases.

Overall, Latané concluded that an individual will experience more impact the higher the status, the more immediate the influence, and the greater the number of other people affecting him or her (Latané, 1981, p.344). His research showed that group expectation is a powerful force that dictates individual or minority reaction.

Normative Social Influence is another theory that parallels social impact theory and the spiral of silence. This theory was developed mostly due to psychologist Solomon Asch's study of conformity in social behavior. Asch conducted a series of experiments to see if individuals conformed to group belief even if the correct answer to a problem was blatant. For the purposes of his experiments, conformity was defined as when an individual agrees with or omits his or her opinions in order to be accepted by the larger group he or she belongs to (Asch, 1955, p. 19).

To observe the power of conformity and social acceptance, Asch set up a series of experiments where he told participants that an entire group of their peers believed something was true despite that something being obviously false. Participants conformed and chose the incorrect answer a third of the time, but ninety-six percent of participants answered with the correct answer when asked to answer privately (Asch, 1948, p. 267). Overall, Asch concluded that being accepted by one's peers can overpower reason and silence one's personal opinion. Pressure from one's social group likely leads to public conformity, but an individual might not accept these social norms privately (Asch, 1948, p. 268).

Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State, Robert Cialdini, built off Asch's research and concluded that there are two types of social norms that result in conformity. The first type Cialdini refers to as injunctive norms, which involves "perceptions of which behaviors are typically approved or disapproved," (Cialdini, 2003, p. 105). The second, descriptive norms, involve "perceptions of which behaviors are typically performed," (Cialdini, 2003, p. 105). Both types of social influences were apparent in his research of how social norms and conformity play a role in environmental actions like recycling and littering.

Cialdini concluded, like Asch, that people tend to do "what is socially approved as well as what is popular" rather than acting individually without the influence of peers (Cialdini, 2003, p. 105). His environmental research showed that people were more likely to recycle or litter if they saw another person either recycle or litter regardless of the right or wrong stigma attached to each action. This conformity parallels Noelle-Neuman's spiral of silence research about popular opinion in that the subjects of both

theoretical studies conformed for social acceptance whether or not they actually agreed to the social norms.

CHAPTER 4

GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This proposed study is based on the following general research questions. Questions were created based on the material analyzed in the literature review, specifically the topics presented in Harvell's dissertation, "Political bias: A look into the college classroom," and Van Hout and Macgilchrist's ethnographic study, "Framing the news: An ethnographic view of business writing."

RQ1: Is there censorship, voluntary or involuntary, present in the student newsroom?

This questions aims to see if there is actual censorship present in the college newsroom. This includes personal censorship through omissions as described in Noelle-Neumann's theory, as well as censorship directly imposed by student peers, professors or university policy.

RQ2: If censorship is happening, is the spiral of silence an accurate theoretical lens to explain these conflicts in the college newsroom?

This questions looks to the key characteristics of Noelle-Neumann's theory to see if there is a correlation that would help explain why censorship is happening in the newsroom. It takes into account the parts of the spiral of silence that are applicable and those that are not.

RQ3: If the spiral of silence theory is not applicable, what are other theories or concepts that would explain censorship in the college newsroom?

This question addresses the other theories that might be more applicable to studying censorship conflicts in the student newsroom.

CHAPTER 5

METHODS

This study uses two types of data collection to test whether or not the spiral of silence is applicable to the student broadcast newsroom. An ethnographic/non-participatory observation approach supplemented with qualitative interviews to collect data on the presence and effects of the spiral of silence in the newsroom was used. The ethnographic approach sought to emulate that of Tom Van Hout and Felicitas Macgilchrist's 2010 study of framing the news. Their study followed a news writer during the process of writing a news story from pitching the story to submitting it to the copy desk (Van Hout & Macgilchrist, 2010 p. 180). The authors used this qualitative approach to look at how the story changes based on numerous influences. While Van Hout and Macgilchrist's study focuses on one staff writer and one story, the same ethnographic principles can be applied to this study on the spiral of silence.

The purpose of observing and supplementing these observations with qualitative interviews was to note changes in behavior and then follow up with questions about these behaviors in confidential interviews. Observing student-to-student and student-to-professor interaction test the veracity of the interviewees' responses to the research questions. It also gave the researcher a chance to see the dynamic of the class first hand (i.e., either during production or during the critique meeting). Observing these behaviors led to more research questions/potential follow-up interviews.

Observation took place from September 13, 2012 through December 7, 2012. During this time, the researcher came into the class three times a week (Monday, Thursday and Friday) and observed the preproduction broadcast preparations, the daily broadcast and

the postproduction meeting. During the weekly observations, the researcher spent one day the control booth, one day in the audio booth and one day in the studio to observe all dynamics at play during the broadcasts. During the course of the class, students were curious about the research observations being conducted, but none seemed to mind that the researcher was taking notes about behavioral patterns. While not directly participating in the class, the researcher spoke to the students casually to maintain a comfortable relationship within the newsroom and gain student trust.

Initially, the focus of observation was on student interaction, reaction to criticism, professor and news director involvement and conflict resolution. However, as the study progressed, notes were taken on other unexpected circumstances or occurrences that might apply to the topic of the spiral of silence. Notes were be handwritten during the classroom observation and organized by date, event and overall theme. Themes were defined by the initial topics of observation (i.e. student interactions, criticism reaction, etc.), but also included other instances/themes that appeared when observing. Methods to organize notes included color-coordinating themes using highlighters. After color-coding occurs, themes were then rewritten on note cards and placed in groups according to the already established themes and research patterns. The aforementioned note taking and organization differs from Van Hout's methods and was created based on the researcher's personal organizational preferences.

Qualitative interviews were also conducted simultaneously with the non-participatory observation. This interview method was taken from Reader's 2006 study. In his study, Reader aimed to look at how large and small newspapers interact with their respective communities and deal with ethical decisions that may arise in production, story selection

and event coverage. He interviewed twenty-eight editors from U.S. newspapers. Fourteen were from smaller newspapers, while the last fourteen were from larger newspapers.

Results in the form of first-hand accounts, such as Reader's results, are valuable to this spiral of silence study as they provide personal details that would fully answer the research questions. Ideally, through these one-on-one interviews, students would share their feelings, emotions and individual responses about what they perceive to be potential issues of censorship in the broadcast newsroom. In turn, these responses helped determine whether or not the spiral of silence theory was applicable to censorship issues within the student newsroom.

The interview questions for this college newsroom study were based on the five key points within the spiral of silence problem in the classroom and newsroom previously discussed in the literature review. Interview answers were organized like the field notes.

Interviews included the following questions and probes. The number after each question corresponds to the research question that particular interview question attempts to answer.

- 1: What do you feel the media's job is? Why? (RQ3)
- 2: In your opinion, do the class broadcasts/students achieve this? Why or why not? (RQ3)
- 3: Based on your experience in this newsroom, do you think the students, professor and news director work to maintain a balance in story content? How have they done this? (RQ1&2)
- 4: Was there a time when you did not speak out against a decision made either by

your fellow students, professor or news director because you feared your opinion would be unpopular and reflect poorly upon your grade/role in the classroom? (RQ1&2)

- 5: Are there any story ideas or topics that are considered “off limits?” Which ones are they? (RQ1)
- 6: To your knowledge, have you ever not aired a segment because it clashed with a majority opinion or thought it would offend viewers or people involved in the class?
- 7: Based on your experience in this newsroom, how have the professor and news director exercised an influence on the content of the broadcasts? (RQ1&2)
- 8: How is conflict typically resolved? (RQ2)
- 9: How does university policy influence students to address stories? (RQ 1&2)

Additional probing questions were also asked based upon individual responses and reoccurring themes within the newsroom. These questions were used to clarify topics that the interviewee brought up or to check the veracity of a topic that previous interviewees had mentioned. Demographic and behavioral information were collected in addition to the answers to the research questions. Student position(s), history with the professor/news director and behavior during the interview were taken into account during this study. Procedural information, like story selection process and ethics guidelines, were also taken into account.

This specific upper division broadcast journalism class was selected for this study for two reasons. Primarily, this class was used because it provides content for a public university news channel, as opposed to a private or religiously affiliated university media.

Generally, public universities have a more lenient policy when it comes to airing student work or publishing a student newspaper, because they do not have take into consideration religious traditions and private funding. Without having to conform to these additional guidelines, this class is the closest representation of an unbiased, public forum.

Secondly, this class was selected for convenience. This student newsroom was the closest in proximity and all the members of the class are students at the university, which made them easier to contact than students from other public universities.

Interviewees were selected based on their level of involvement on the broadcast staff. The initial goal was to interview all students and the graduate student news director. These individuals were selected because each position needed to be represented in the collection of data. Also, all of these people hold the most power and shape not only the content, but the dynamic of the newsroom as well. Coincidentally, these seem to be the most likely candidates to instigate and notice the spiral of silence if it was present in the newsroom.

All interviewees were initially contacted through email addresses listed on the class roster. The initial email consisted of information on this paper topic and the theory of the spiral of silence, and asked if individual members would agree to be interviewed for this study. After agreeing to participate, all student interviews were conducted in the researcher's private office. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present at the time of each interview. Each staff member should be interviewed individually to ensure their anonymity and keep their opinions private. Overall, the goal of these qualitative interviews was to provide insight into the role, if any, of the spiral of silence in the newsroom and what can be done to prevent it or eliminate it. If answers indicate that the

spiral of silence is not applicable to censorship in the student newsroom, these questions might indicate other theories that would be more appropriate.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Overall, this ethnographic study supplemented by qualitative interviews aimed to explore whether or not censorship was present in the college broadcast newsroom and then if the spiral of silence was an appropriate theoretical lens to explain this conflict. The ethnographic observations took place over a three-month period, between September to December 2012. The researcher looked for instances of how censorship and conflict influenced class communication and editorial decisions.

In addition to these observations, seven out of the twenty-two students volunteered to be interviewed for this project after being emailed about the project. Five of these students were second-year student, or known as retreads in class vernacular, while the remaining two were first-time students enrolled in the course. Interview questions targeted the issues of censorship and intimidation as well as the various student definitions of news and whether or not the students believed their broadcasts lived up to these news responsibilities.

Data collected from both methods were broken down into three different types of censorship and categorized by five spiral of silence characteristics found in Noelle-Neumann's original research. While the main goal of this project to see if the spiral of silence applied to these classroom conflicts, data was also compared to Normative Social Influence and social impact theory to see if either of these theories would be more applicable when explaining newsroom conflict.

After the interviews and observations were completed, student responses and classroom observations were categorized and applied to the three aforementioned general research questions. The following are analyses of each question.

RQ1: Is there censorship, voluntary or involuntary, present in the student newsroom?

This questions aims to see if there is actual censorship present in the college newsroom. This includes personal censorship through omissions as described in Noelle-Neumann's theory, as well as censorship directly imposed by student peers, professors or university policy. Both classroom observations and student interviews indicated that there was censorship present in the student newsroom. Voluntary and involuntary censorship by students and editorial censorship by the professor and producers emerged for various reasons. The following is a breakdown of the prominent censorship observations and interview responses noted throughout the course of the semester. Each observation is categorized as involuntary, voluntary or editorial control censorship.

Involuntary Censorship

During the research period, there were three prominent instances where involuntary censorship was noted within the student newsroom. The following are accounts of these three occurrences.

9/20/12: A retread student decided to do the weather. Over the headset, another retread student who repeatedly criticized other students began insulting the weather girl about how she spoke right before she was to go on the air. This student was visibly offended

(she turned red and looked down at the floor) but continued on to do the weather. Later in the postproduction meeting, the same retread who had initially harassed the weather girl told her “No one reads that slow and remains an anchor,” and walked away without letting the new student respond. When asked by her peer if she was going to say anything in response, the weather girl replied, “It’s just not worth it. He only listens to himself.”

10/12/12: During the postproduction meeting, a retread student interrupted a first-time student with harsh criticism of the first-time student’s news package. The retread kept butting in and would not let the first-time student interject her feelings towards the piece. When the retread had finished speaking, the first-time student remained silent and withdrew from the rest of the postproduction conversation.

10/23/12: A first-time student was the producer for the day’s show. Aside from minor technical glitches, there were no major critiques from the professor or other students. However, after the class prior to the postproduction meeting, a retread student who was unhappy with the show cornered the first-time student, swearing at her and yelling that the producer did not know what she was doing. The retread walked off before the producer could say anything. When asked about the incident during the next class, the first-time student said “This is a class. As a new student, I am supposed to be learning, not be belittled. I am just not going to say anything anymore. It’s not worth getting screamed at.” The new student followed through with this behavior and hardly said anything when she produced the rest of her shows for the semester.

Any instance of involuntary censorship during the observational period was generally characterized by the student who was being criticized not being given the chance to respond by the student who was doing the criticizing. The student who was criticizing either physically walked away from the confrontation or kept interrupting the student or students who wanted to counter the criticism. This censorship was classified as involuntary because in all cases the students literally were not given the chance to respond to criticism.

It was also noted that voluntary censorship was a secondary effect of involuntary censorship. In every instance of involuntary criticism, the student on the receiving end of the critique vowed not to confront the other student or withdrew from the conversation as to not aggravate the situation further. Due to the initial inability to respond, the student who was being criticized voluntarily kept his or her promise to not interact with certain students or did not feel it was constructive to confront the aggressor after the incident.

The way criticism was worded and delivered also played a large role in whether or not students censored themselves in the newsroom. All three of the examples of involuntary censorship noted above were brought on by insults and non-constructive criticism. The student who was critiquing was always a retread who was aggressive in their tone and language, often times yelling and using obscenities. In other postproduction meetings, criticism was worded constructively and sometimes accompanied by a balancing conversation of what the students did correctly in that day's broadcast. Most students were receptive to what others had to say when this was the format for postproduction meetings. Critiques were worded in a non-threatening and non-aggressive manner and conducted more like a conversation than an attack on a

particular student. In terms of understanding involuntary censorship, the dynamic between how criticism was delivered and the different reactions helped determine whether or not the student was being (involuntarily or voluntarily) censored unfairly or was just oversensitive to any form of criticism of their work.

Student interviews also showed that lack of resources and time led to involuntary censorship in that not all stories that wanted to be covered could be covered. “Unfortunately there are times...that as students we are very busy, we are tied up with other classes so we are not able to go out there and pursue hard news as it happens because we don’t have the time or a live truck,” said Interviewee #1. This sentiment was made in four interviews and is an example of involuntary censorship because the students would like to cover more breaking news stories, but physically cannot because they are juggling other classes or physically cannot get the equipment to a certain event. This is not a voluntary choice, as they are forced into not being able to cover certain events/topics due to lack of time and equipment.

Voluntary Censorship

The following observations provide evidence that shows voluntary censorship is present in the student newsroom and that this type of censorship extends beyond being a reaction to involuntary censorship.

9/13/12: In the week leading up to the first live broadcast, the professor was leading a meeting with the class explaining their duties for the rest of the semester. During the meeting, one student spoke up to contribute to the conversation but was silenced abruptly

by the professor. The student immediately blushed with embarrassment and went back to working at a computer. Later on in the discussion the professor allowed another retread to speak out. After letting this student speak, the professor realized he treated the first student unfairly and apologized to the first retread who spoke out. The retread briefly accepted the apology, but continued to sit back at the computer and remained silent for the rest of the class.

10/18/12: The same retread who insulted other students prior to this class verbally lashed out again during a show towards one of the sports reporters in regards to the dramatic pauses he used to transition between sports segments. Both students soon were egging each other on with insults, and the professor had to remind them to “be nice.” After this exchange, the retread who started the confrontation continued to criticize other students. The professor and other students were clearly getting frustrated with his behavior. Their frustration was visible through eye-rolling and snide comments from peers about the student made under one’s breath. Despite their frustration, no one addressed this behavior during the postproduction meeting. When asked why the criticized students did not speak out, another retread student replied “He’s always been like this. You just ignore it and move on. He won’t change no matter what anyone says.”

11/1/12: The chain of command was tested when the director clashed with the producer in regards to how to run the broadcast. The director started out the show confidently, asserting himself and being exact with his cues. However, the producer disagreed with one of the director’s early cues and proceeded to direct the broadcast for the rest of the

show. The director tried to regain control and defend his directing decisions, but began second guessing himself and losing his composure. The producer proved to be more dominant, and the director was soon taking his cues from the producer, even turning to double-check with her before making any final calls. The director was completely stripped of his voice and confidence for the rest of the show. This retread producer had displayed this behavior before when she confronted a first-time student about her producing on week prior. This pattern also repeated with the same students a week later.

11/9/12: The retread who constantly criticizes other students allegedly blamed him not getting a story in on time on a fellow classmate. This classmate went to the audio room during the show and discussed the situation with another student who was running audio for that day's broadcast. The blamed student said "I told you he'd blame me. He never owns up to anything." Her classmate responded, "I know. The lack of communication in this class makes me want to hurt myself."

The conversation eventually branched off into a discussion of the effectiveness of the postproduction meetings. The student running audio commented, "There's a difference between constructive criticism and telling someone they basically suck at life." Her classmate responded, "Everyone only looks out for themselves." When asked why they did not voice their concerns publicly and constructively during class or in the postproduction meetings both replied with the sentiment that people would listen but no one would do anything about changing the behavior.

11/15/12: The show closed with a story about musician Taylor Swift and featured a student from the class singing along to Swift's latest album and explaining why the musician was so influential. Both the professor and rest of the class thought that the piece was "self-serving" because it was shot in the newsroom and featured only a student who was in the class. The student who was in the story, and who subsequently produced the piece, turned red with embarrassment of the criticism and sat with her head down. When asked by her peer if she had any thoughts, she did not defend the piece, only agreed with her classmates that their critique was accurate.

Within this semester of observation, voluntary censorship was characterized by refusal to defend a story, a complete shut down of communication and often times agreeing with the majority or dominant personality. Physical indicators (i.e. blushing, looking down, lowering voice, silence etc.) were also present in most cases when a student censored himself. In contrast to involuntary censorship, the student who was on the defense initiated voluntary censorship and had the opportunity to respond to comments or to a specific peer. Voluntary censorship in these cases was also not a result of involuntary censorship, instead being an initial reaction to criticism or insult.

Embarrassment and self-doubt that stemmed from criticism from the professor and classmates were the main motivators for voluntary censorship during the observations of this study. When a student censored himself, it was because someone questioned his judgment in regards to a story or challenged the way he was doing his job in the newsroom or studio. Students who felt embarrassed or challenged either by constructive criticism or non-constructive criticism withdrew from the class dynamic

completely or went along with the opinions and suggestions of the majority or more vocal peers.

Unlike involuntary censorship, the way criticism was worded or presented did not have any effect on whether or not an individual decided to voluntarily censor himself. During the semester, there were scenarios where students were criticized either through insults or constructively, but the type of criticism did not dictate how students responded in regards to voluntary censorship observations.

Instead, the class standing (i.e. retread or first-time student) of each student played a large role in how a student responded to criticism. With involuntary criticism, there were examples of both retreads and new students being the recipients of negative feedback and perpetrators of involuntary censorship. When looking at voluntary criticism, with the exception of the instance where the professor silenced a student in the examples listed above, all of those who voluntarily censored themselves were first-year students. Typically, the retread students were the ones to critique parts of the daily show and respond to criticism openly. Interviewee #7, a retread, said “If I feel something is wrong, I will speak out against it...I will chew out anyone, and if someone steps up to me, I will win...I think most people are [aware of this], which is why when I do something, no one really gives me shit.” Interviewee #1, another retread, also mentioned “I’m an outspoken person. If I feel that something needs to be talked about, I’ll let [that person] know either inside of class or outside.”

Subsequently, these students, as well as other retreads, were also the ones that the first-year students were censoring themselves from. Interviewee #4 said “I felt that, and this is something that a lot of people have mentioned, we’ve felt a little outnumbered,

because there were a lot of retreads who were obviously very vocal, and they've done this before, so you kind of feel that your opinion isn't going to be as valued as much." Overall, the class standing of each student had an effect on how he received criticism and whether or not he chose to voluntarily censor himself.

Personality type also played a role in voluntary censorship. While all of those who voluntarily censored themselves were first-time students, there were other first-time students who responded well to constructive criticism. Not all first-year students exhibited voluntary censorship. Some first-year students felt confident enough to speak up, defend themselves and ask questions when faced with both constructive and non-constructive criticism. Those first-year students who did censor themselves routinely displayed introverted characteristics including speaking quietly, working by themselves and minimally contributing to postproduction meetings. Similarly, those first-year students who did respond to critique routinely contributed to class discussion and preferred working with other classmates. These personality differences are important to note, because they directly relate to whether or not a student censored himself when faced with criticism.

Along these lines, voluntary censorship was used in order to be kinder to fellow students. Interviewee #2 mentioned that "Sometimes I've wanted to speak out to the reporter and but I figure like who am I to judge you. It's not that I fear it, it's just that who am I to tell you if you did good or bad. I don't really speak out." This reasoning was mentioned by two other interviewees who felt that it was not their place to critique other classmates' work, as it might cause these classmates to become embarrassed.

“That’s [the professor’s] job, to provide us with constructive criticism. He’s the professional and knows better than us,” said Interviewee #4.

When criticism was delivered also played a role in voluntary censorship. Throughout the semester, there were multiple occasions where students would receive criticism during the actual broadcast. These students who were criticized decided to censor themselves during the broadcast and confront other students during the postproduction meeting. The following are instances where students voluntarily censored themselves during the actual broadcast.

10/5/12: A retread who had repeatedly offended other classmates in the past was shouting insults and obscenities to the director and producer from the audio booth during a broadcast in regards to what he thought to be incorrect audio cues. The director started to say something in response, but the assistant director casually told him to let it go and reminded him to focus on the live broadcast that was more important. Later in the postproduction meeting, the director and producer both confronted the retread in audio in regards to his behavior. This scenario exemplifies the second type of voluntary omission that is characterized by students not speaking out in order to focus on keeping the broadcast on track. The director and producer who were the target of verbal criticism omitted their opinions in the moment and focused on the task at hand. After the broadcast had been completed, they confronted the retread about his inappropriate behavior.

10/12/12: The retread producer for this day's broadcast decided to pull a piece last minute in order to meet the required show time. The retread who put together the package removed himself completely from the show and sat in the classroom for the duration of the broadcast. During the postproduction meeting when another student asked what happened to his piece, he had an emotional breakdown and verbally attacked the retread producer who pulled his segment. He started to cry and screamed at her "Are you kidding me? You robbed me of my time and effort." Another student took him out of the classroom, and the retread producer was left stunned.

These examples show that voluntary censorship was a reaction to timing in addition to being a result of insecurity or embarrassment. The students who were the recipients of negative criticism waited until the broadcast was over to confront the person criticizing their work. Their motivation was either urging by fellow students to wait or the need to keep the broadcast running smoothly. They could have confronted the instigator right away but decided to not start an argument or confrontation because it would have slowed the progress of the class or broadcast.

Censorship Through Editorial Control

The last type of censorship was through editorial control. There was only one instance of this form of censorship during the observational period.

12/3/12: The last example of censorship of editorial content occurred when the student body president came in for an interview late in the semester. He was scheduled to be

interviewed about the failed student elections and the problems with the election committee. However, despite the professor's urging to ask him questions about the election controversy, the student producer told the interviewer to avoid asking these types of questions. During the postproduction meeting, the producer explained that he wanted to stay on the president's "good side" in order to be able to interview him for a second assignment for another class. This was his reasoning behind having the interviewer avoid asking the harsher questions about the student elections.

In this solitary instance, censorship through editorial control was motivated by a student's personal agenda for the interviewee. No real conclusions can be drawn about this type of censorship, as this was not common practice or a repeated pattern of behavior. However, in the post production meeting for this broadcast, eight students and the professor expressed concern as to why the original questions had be scrapped in favor of less controversial questions. The majority of students agreed that they should have asked the original questions and maintained that the interview suffered due to the student producer's incorrect judgment. Since this one example happened at the end of the semester, it did not have a significant impact on class dynamic and the way the broadcasts were put together collectively throughout the semester. However, it can be concluded from this reaction that the majority of the students would not consider this type of censorship unethical and detrimental to the quality of the broadcast. This conclusion was reinforced sentiment in two student interviews. When asked if there were any stories that were off-limits, both students independently brought up this incident. Interviewee # 6 said in context with the student vice president interview, " [The producer] shouldn't

have done that. The media's job is to present all sides. We didn't do that [with the student body] president.”

All seven interviewees answered that there were no topics off limits and no university influence when it came to producing stories. “I feel that if someone turned in a story on sex trafficking, he'd air it,” said Interviewee #7. “If someone turned in a story like the history of the dildo, we'd run it. I don't feel like there is anything that's really out of bounds, which is cool.” The five who chose to elaborate on the question responded that the most involvement in story selection other students and the professor had was to suggest topics that they heard about within the campus and Las Vegas communities. For example, the professor suggested a student produce a piece on life-like nursing mannequins used by the nursing school on campus. A student then decided to produce the story, as he did not have a topic for his story due that week. The five interviewees who elaborated on the story topics interview question noted that there was no pressure to cover the topics suggested. All topics suggested were merely suggestions with no hidden agenda or obligation attached. Similarly, when asked whether or not a story had been pulled because it clashed with majority opinion, all seven interviewees said no. Overall, these responses show that there was no trend of censorship of story content within the student newsroom.

RQ2: If censorship is happening, is the spiral of silence an accurate theoretical lens to explain these conflicts in the college newsroom?

Based of the results and analysis provided for research question one, censorship is happening in the student newsroom. To determine if the spiral of silence is an accurate

way to explain this censorship, five defining criteria must be met. First there must be a social threat of isolation felt by the minority group (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, p. 145). In the context of the classroom, this included a threat of not being accepted by peers or the professor. Throughout the observation period, there were no threats made either in a class-wide conversation or student-to-student conversations regarding excluding classmates because of certain opinions. This lack of threat was confirmed when all seven interviewees said they did not feel that there was a threat of exclusion in the newsroom. Interviewee #1 summed up these seven responses by saying “[The professor] is pretty lenient as long as you do everything that’s listed in your job...I think if he knows what you do and how good you do it and how much you do it, I think he really sees that as passing.” In terms of a potential threat of isolation from other students, Interviewee # 3 mentioned that “everybody pretty much just did...whatever they wanted to do. It was always ‘Oh ok, go ahead and do that,’ and no one openly restricted anyone.” It can be concluded then from both the observations and the interviews that no perceived threat of isolation was present in the newsroom.

Secondly, a fear of isolation must be present in order for the spiral of silence to accurately explain conflicts in the newsroom (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, p. 149). In the case of the student newsroom, students would have to fear being isolated from their peers through certain behavior. While none of the students interviewed specifically mentioned the need to be accepted by their peers or the professor, the fact that censorship was present in the newsroom was a strong indicator that, while an open threat of isolation was not present, a fear of isolation was present. As discussed in the analysis for RQ1, most students who censored themselves claimed in the moment that it was because the

In order for the spiral of silence to be applicable, students would have to have a “quasistatistical ability” that instinctively picks up on public opinion within the newsroom environment (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, p. 147). All voluntary censorship examples mentioned above can potentially indicate that the students in the class had a “quasistatistical ability.” Students who censored their speech to spare themselves embarrassment were able to gauge what the majority opinion was and be able to therefore conclude that their comments would clash against the majority. Along the lines of this speculation, three interviewees mentioned that they did not say anything because they did not feel it was their place to comment. Aside from this speculation through observation and these minor comments, it cannot be concluded that the class as a whole had the ability to gauge what was the majority opinion. There is the possibility that sparing oneself or other classmates embarrassment could be mistaken for gauging the popular opinion of the newsroom. Overall there is too much room for interpretation to say concretely whether or not all students could gauge the majority opinion of the class with the “quasistatistical ability” that Noelle-Neumann refers to.

Lastly, students must show a “pluralistic ignorance,” or mistaken belief that the seemingly majority opinion is actually the majority opinion of the class if the spiral of silence were to be applicable to the student newsroom (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, p. 154). As discussed with the “quasistatistical ability” to gauge public opinion, there were no concrete observations or interview responses to first help determine what the true majority opinion was, and secondly, measure what the perceived majority opinion was to see if most of the class was mistaken or correct with their assumptions of the reigning set of beliefs in the classroom.

In conclusion, the spiral of silence is not an accurate theoretical lens to explain these classroom conflicts as only two of the five defining criteria were supported by class observations and student interviews. Observation and interview results only provided evidence that showed there was a fear of isolation within the newsroom and that was a willingness to speak out by the re-reads and willingness to omit opinions by the first-time students. Research did not show that there was an actual threat of isolation, that the students had a “quasistatistical ability” to gauge public opinion rather than embarrassment, and a mistaken belief for what was the actual majority opinion. Thus, the spiral of silence is not applicable to the understanding conflict, or censorship, within the student newsroom.

RQ3: If the spiral of silence theory is not applicable, what are other theories or concepts that would explain censorship in the college newsroom?

Based on the results for RQ2, the spiral of silence is not an accurate theoretical lens to understand conflict in the student newsroom. Instead, components of Social Impact Theory would be more helpful when trying to understand these issues.

First, social impact theory states that the impact on the individual is determined by the surrounding group’s strength and immediacy. In the case of the student newsroom that was observed, the surrounding group would be the class consisting of both the students and the professor. Since the students saw each other five times a week for multiple hours each day, the effects of the criticism and subsequent censorship were immediate when working within this close proximity. Being a hands-on production class,

students were forced to work closely with one another, and to subsequently deal with face-to-face criticism, when putting together a successful broadcast each weekday.

The strength of the common retreat opinions also proved to be overwhelming for first-time students. Observations showed that these opinions had enough strength to intimidate fellow classmates. Retreats were usually the instigators in involuntary censorship, confronting students, most often first-time students, face-to-face with both constructive and non-constructive criticism. Two students who were interviewed also mentioned omitting their opinion even when they disagreed with the executive decision that was being made. Interviewee #4: “There were times, again for a lot of people, where I just kept my mouth shut and somebody did something I didn’t think was right, and I should have said something because I didn’t agree.” The retreats were very vocal when criticizing and saying how their specific shows should be run. This forcefulness intimidated some of their classmates into censoring their opinions.

Social impact theory also states that individual reaction gets worse as the group’s size gets larger. The frequency of voluntary censorship did in fact increase in the broadcast newsroom if one student or a small group of students felt that they were in the minority opinion. Most of the time, one-on-one criticism was well-received if the criticism was voiced constructively. However, if one person felt attack by a larger group of students or had a differing opinion than the majority of the class, he would voluntarily censor himself either out of embarrassment or agree out of self-preservation.

Conversely, the impact of criticism lessened when more people were the targets of said criticism. Since the retreats made up the majority of the class, these students did not take criticism from the minority seriously. Interviewees #1, #7 and #6 mentioned that

they believed in actively voicing their opinions, and Interviewee #7 even went so far as to say that “if someone steps up to me, I will win...I think most people are [aware of this], which is why when I do something, no one really gives me shit.” The minority did in fact feel this way, with several students choosing to censor themselves, because they felt that some retreads would not change their behavior even if confronted. Similarly, if two or more students were receiving criticism for the same story or news package, this smaller group of students was more vocal than students who were being publicly singled out and critiqued. Overall, observations and interviews showed that the impact of criticism lessened when a larger group of students were being critiqued.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In order to verify the results of this study, four improvements should be made when researching this topic further. First, this study should have been over a longer span of time, preferably over at least the entire school year rather than a semester. The length of a full year provides a natural beginning and end to research. It allows the researcher to observe the full arc of the class rather than just stopping research in the middle of the year. All projects would be observed, as well as all class interaction. By not observing the full semester, the researcher risks using incomplete data to form conclusions. Observations and interviews that could strengthen or weaken the conclusions drawn by this study might take place in the following semester that was not observed.

Observing two complete semesters would also allow the researcher to track the changes in classroom behavior of the new students who repeat the class as retreads the following semester. The researcher would be able to see if the students who were new to the class in the fall exhibit new behavior, both positive and negative, as they become retreads in the spring. It would also be easy to observe how this new behavior, if any, affects the class dynamic between fellow classmates and the professor.

The second limitation that should be improved on would be a larger group of students. Strictly thinking in terms of the university curriculum, a cross study of both journalism broadcasting classes (both the 200 and 400 level courses) would be appropriate to see how students in both courses grow within the classroom. For example, research might show that students who are just starting out with no broadcasting experience in the 200 level course might be more inclined to go with the majority. After

gaining experience through the lower level course, these same students might display more confidence when taking the higher level course, because they are more confident in their abilities as broadcasters and reporters. This type of data is crucial to spiral of silence research, because it might help show that omission is not caused by the perceived majority opinion, instead being caused predominantly by a student's own self-esteem issues and their perceived technical competence when it comes to running the equipment of the class.

Similarly, a third improvement of this study would be to include all platforms of media within the university. A follow up, or larger, study should look at what role, if any, the spiral of silence plays on broadcasting, radio and print media of a select university. This more comprehensive approach might reveal behavioral or professional patterns that are more prevalent with a certain type of media production and ultimately help all forms of university media try to eliminate the spiral of silence effects.

Lastly, a fourth improvement on this study would be that there should be incentive either monetary (i.e. gift card) or extra credit given for students who choose to participate in interviews with the researcher. The lack of student participation for interviews was a problem in this study. Not even half the class elected to sit down and share their thoughts on the class, even after it was stressed that all interviews were confidential and student identities were kept anonymous. While incentive might sway the students' answers to interview questions, it might also encourage more students to volunteer to be interviewed. Overall, incentive might increase student participation and allow the researcher to get a larger amount of interviewees.

Ultimately, this data will assist future researchers both in the short term and long term development of student media, specifically with conflict resolution and management. Improvements could include paying attention to eliminating intimidating behavior to changing class assignments and reading to better cater to all students. These changes would contribute to the overall goal of creating a fair newsroom that puts out unbiased and objective media. Now that censorship and patterns of omission have been identified, further research can verify these patterns in addition to testing new learning and mentoring strategies that will help teach students how to conduct themselves more professionally with their peers and in a professional setting.

Conclusions drawn from this research can extend beyond the student newsroom and speak directly to educators looking to more effectively manage their classroom environments while promoting constructive and open communication. Trends in censorship, intimidation and omission can be further explored through studies that use this research as a launchpad. Once the causes of these types of behavior are fully understood, more emphasis can be placed on conflict resolution and management within the any classroom, thus making classrooms better learning environments.

APPENDIX



**Social/Behavioral IRB – Exempt Review
Deemed Exempt**

DATE: December 7, 2012

TO: Dr. Daniel Stout, Journalism and Media Studies

FROM: Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects

RE: Notification of IRB Action
Protocol Title: **Muting the Masses: Effects of the Spiral of Silence in the College Newsroom**
Protocol # 1104-3804M

This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45CFR46 and deemed exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)2.

PLEASE NOTE:

Upon Approval, the research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the exempt application reviewed by the ORI – HS and/or the IRB which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent Forms (Information Sheet) and recruitment materials. The official versions of these forms are indicated by footer which contains the date exempted.

changes to the application may cause this project to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a **Modification Form**. When the above-referenced project has been completed, please submit a **Continuing Review/Progress Completion report** to notify ORI – HS of its closure.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at IRB@unlv.edu or call 895-2794.

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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Blaire Anna Lacey Ritter

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, Journalism, 2005
Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA

Thesis Title: Muting the masses: Effects of the spiral of silence in the college newsroom

Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Daniel Stout, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Gary Larson, Ph. D.
Committee Member, Lawrence Mullen, Ph. D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, David Dickens, Ph. D.