

Barack Obama: Examining the Climate of Opinion of Spiral of Silence

Stephen M. Croucher*
Anthony T. Spencer**
Connie McKee***

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between an individual's trust in media and their willingness to voice their opinion about Barack Obama's ethnicity during the 2008 Presidential Campaign. Results among 569 college students reveal a significant positive correlation between media trust and willingness to voice an opinion about Obama's ethnicity. Controlling for sex, education and political affiliation, the relationship between these two constructs increased significantly. Ultimately, the findings reveal the significant influence of media on individual's willingness to voice opinions. The analysis calls for future research into the causal relationship between media trust and willingness to voice an opinion.

Keywords: Political, elections, ethnicity, candidacy, opinions, climate of opinion, mass media.

1. Introduction

A new face entered the White House on January 20th 2009 when Barack Obama became President of the United States of America. This face was extremely unique as it belonged to an African-American. Barack Obama became the first African-American to be inaugurated into the highest office in what is arguably the most powerful nation on earth. A biracial man, Obama, negotiated his own ethnic identity as an African-American man as the media and cultural institutions also constructed him as such during the presidential campaign. When a candidate enters the political arena, mass media outlets play a major role in that candidate's identity creation. Jackson (2004) terms this personal, cultural and mass mediated process as "racial identity negotiation" (p. 14). Essentially, the candidate and media institutions co-create the way the politician will be viewed by the public.

In this presidential election race became a key factor in the minds of many voters as to how they would cast their ballots (Dunne, 2008; Henninger, 2008; Miah, 2009; Newport, 2008). King and Smith (2008) argue that in contemporary American politics there are two competing ideologies: those, which are race-conscious, and those, which attempt not to view race. According to King and Smith these ideologies often fall along political divides of

**(Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, 2008) is an Assistant Professor,*

***(MA, West Texas A&M University, 2000) is an Instructor in the Department of Communication at West Texas A&M University*

****(Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, 2006) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication Studies at Bowling Green State University.*

conservative/liberal and Republican/Democrat. As Spencer and Croucher (2008) assert, vital cultural variables, such as ethnicity are understudied in political contexts. Specifically the authors argue ethnicity may be a significant variable in relation to an individual's ability to speak out against a perceived climate of opinion in political contexts.

This paper focuses on understanding climate of opinion, one important aspect of spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1984, 1985, 2004). It is well documented, primarily through agenda-setting research, that media impact the public's perception of which issues are important political topics (Behr & Igengar, 1985; Dearing, 1989; Kimsey & Hantz, 1978; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The media essentially tell the public which key policy issues to think about and to some degree how they should form opinions about those issues (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997). In the case of the 2008 presidential election, ethnicity was a key factor in media reports and discussions of Obama's candidacy. College-aged students were a key Obama target audience (Kaufman, 2008; Morse-Gagne, 2008). Moreover, as more than 2.3 million Americans under 30 participated in Democratic contests in 2008, up 170% from 2004, this constituency clearly showed its electoral importance once again (Holmes, 2008). Thus, this paper addresses the willingness of college students to voice their opinions on the influence of ethnicity on Obama's presidential candidacy is examined.

Spiral of Silence

Spiral of silence concentrates on the scenario when people voice their opinions on a subject depending if they feel they are in the majority viewpoint or the minority one. People ascertain a climate of opinion through what Noelle-Neumann terms a "quasi-statistical sense" (1974, 1984, 1985). This was later deemed less of a statistical function and more of a cognitive decision-making process (Noelle-Neumann, 2004). Often the person who holds the minority viewpoint will not go against the majority. They often fall into a spiral of silence refusing to be a part of the vocal minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1984) keeping their opinions to themselves, when they would rather speak out regarding certain salient issues.

Noelle-Neumann (1974) developed this theory when researching the two principal political parties, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, in West German elections held in the 1960s and 1970s. The basis of this theory is the amount of public support shown for an opinion impacts how the public perceives the opinion. If a person believes their opinion is unpopular, they will be less likely to voice it, thus one group, which perceives itself to be in the minority; will fall into a spiral of silence on a particular issue. The converse also holds true, if a group perceives its view to be dominant the group members are more likely to speak out. People determine if they hold the majority or minority viewpoint by the "climate of opinion" they sense in society (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). When participants cannot accurately gauge a climate of opinion they often fall into what political scholars often refer to as the public opinion fallacy of pluralistic ignorance (Taylor, 1982). Oftentimes people simply cannot correctly gauge the climate of opinion.

There are four theses which are central to the ability to detect a spiral of silence effect in a population (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1977, 1984). First, most people are afraid of becoming isolated by

their views. Next, people observe the attitudes of others around them and express their own views accordingly. The individual will also attempt to discern which viewpoints can be expressed without creating a sense of isolation. Last, a person will be more likely to express a viewpoint if the viewpoint concurs with the majority's opinion and less likely to express an opinion if it is not consistent with the climate opinion.

Mass Media & Climate of Opinion

This research project focuses on the intersection between media trust and representation of a person's views as they relate to willingness to voice views regarding political communication and ethnic/cultural constructions. The media essentially tell the public which key policy issues to think about and to some degree how they should form opinions about those issues (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997). Individuals only have knowledge of those issues through media exposure if they do not have access to direct experience (Noelle-Neumann, 1984) and must form their opinions on the subject through the frames set by the media (Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004).

Glynn et al. (1997) found there has been insufficient data collected which related spiral of silence to mass media influences. Noelle-Neumann (1984) does acknowledge the influence the media have on the public's perceptions of majority versus minority views on an issue. Lenart (1994) further explains how the media are the primary sources of information on major issues on which people can base their opinions.

Noelle-Neumann admits the mass media effect can be seen when a person is taken outside of his personal zone "he is almost totally dependent on mass media for the facts and for his evaluation of the climate of opinions" (1974, p. 51). She further developed the concept of mass media creating a sense of helplessness in the community by drawing attention to the unidirectional construction of mass communication (1984). Noelle-Neumann contrasts this form of communication with dyadic interactions. She refers to these differences as one-sided and two-sided conversations (p. 154).

While mass media effects have long been regarded as a key element to shaping public opinion, few studies have focused on the power of the mass media to shape opinion as it relates to a person's ability to speak his or her opinion as stated in the spiral of silence model (Kim, Han, Shanahan, & Berdayes, 2004; Neuwirth, 2000; Shamir, 1995). Salmon and Kline (1985) state in a society with a relatively consonant media system, not only should the media display the current climate of opinion, the public should be able to perceive this climate as well. This powerful media effect is most evident in situations where media outlets are the primary or only source(s) of information about a particular topic (Weimann, 1992).

The media are thought to create an agenda that reinforces a particular viewpoint and restricts contradictory perspectives. This effectively establishes how media act as gatekeeper to disseminate information to the public and the public's perception of the framing of a particular message. Mutz (1994) clearly delineates the differences in media usage as it relates to salient political issues: television news tends to be event oriented while newspapers focus more on issues.

Research on spiral of silence and media trust has been conducted on many levels and through many types of analysis. Along with what has been reviewed thus far, voting research has found respondents who felt they held a minority political view were not likely to be hesitant to speak on the record (Katz & Baldassare, 1992). However, the research did find women, older and lower-income residents were less willing to voice their opinions on political issue. Later research by Jeffries, Neuendorf and Atkin (1999) found ethnic ingroup/outgroup difference in how members felt in expressing opinions on a controversial issue, the O.J. Simpson trial.

During political campaigns, such as the 2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign, the tenants of spiral of silence become prevalent. As Noelle-Neumann (1977) states, "not isolating himself is more important [to an individual] than his own judgment" (p. 144). Individuals during campaigns are vulnerable to following the majority's viewpoint due to the influence of media agenda setting and can be afraid to express thoughts, opinions or reasons for voting or not voting for a candidate (Noelle-Neumann, 1984, 2004). Thus in the case of the 2008 presidential campaign, some voters, political commentators and media pundits expressed open fear, disgust, happiness joy and a range of other emotions for the option of voting for an African-American as president. Yet, as young voters irregardless of sex, and political affiliation are considered to be more open to peer pressure and external information (i.e. media agenda setting) (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000), the question remains as to what influence did media coverage of Obama's ethnicity and or the controversy around his ethnicity have on their voting. More importantly, were members of this particular age group, one which helped propel Obama into the White House, willing to openly discuss Obama's ethnicity? This study addresses these issues by offering the following research question:

RQ: Controlling for an individual's sex, level of education, and political affiliation, what is the relationship between an individual's willingness to voice opinions about Obama's ethnicity and their trust in media?

2. Method

Participants and procedures

A total of 569 college students in the Southwestern and Midwestern United States completed surveys for this study. Participants were recruited by researchers in both communication and non-communication courses at two mid-size universities. Data collection took place in fall 2008 and was completed before Election Day 2008. While this sampling strategy does not involve random probabilistic sampling, it represents a case of "sampling to" as opposed to "sampling from" a population. Sampling to a population represents a hypothetical population, whose nature can to a certain extent be understood only based on the socio-demographic characteristics. However, it does represent a larger group to which results may be generalized (DeMaris, 2004). In this particular case, the results are to be generalized to college-aged students.

Of the participants, 270 (47.5%) were male and 299 (52.5%) were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 61 ($M = 20.99$, $SD = 4.56$). Concerning highest educational level achieved, 70.7% stated high school, 14.1% a 2-year degree, 10% a 4-year degree,

and 5.2% a master's or more. This sample included 421 Caucasians, 66 African-Americans, 45 Hispanics, and 37 individuals who identified as from "other ethnic groups." For political affiliation, 37.1% identified as Republican, 26% as Democratic, 17.8% as Independent, 4.4% as Libertarian, 3.3% as Green, 5.8% as other, and 5.6% did not designate a political affiliation.

Measures

To ascertain individuals' willingness to voice their opinion about the role of Obama's ethnicity on his candidacy and to measure individuals' trust in media, a set of measures was used based on Spencer and Croucher's (2008) test of spiral of silence in the Basque regions of France and Spain. In the current study, trust in media was measured with a five 7-point Likert-type questions. Questions included items such as, "To what degree do you believe your daily news source." Responses were rated from 1 to a very little extent to 7 to a great extent. Willingness to voice opinion about the role of Obama's ethnicity in the presidential campaign was measured with 6 -point Likert-type questions. Questions included items such as, "If you were in a public place and heard a conversation supporting or opposing Barack Obama because of his race/ethnicity, how likely would you be to enter the conversation." Responses were rated from 1 very unlikely to 7 very likely. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and alpha levels associated with the study variables and measures.

Table 1 : Means, standard deviations, correlations and alpha levels associated with the study variables

| Variable | M | SD | (1) | (2) | ▲▲ |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|-----|-----|
| (1) Trust in News | 4.26 | 1.19 | | | .90 |
| (2) Willingness to voice opinion | 4.12 | 1.15 | .12* | | .70 |

Results

To answer the research question a multiple regression model was conducted. Demographic variables were coded as follows: sex (0 = male, 1 = female), highest educational level achieved (0 = high school, 1 = 2 year degree, 2 = 4-year degree, 3 = master's, 4 = doctorate and 5 = other), and political affiliation (0 = Democrat, 1 = Green, 2 = Independent, 3 = Libertarian, 4 = Republican, and 5 = other). In model 1, trust in media was entered as the independent variable and willingness to voice opinion as the dependent variable. This model was significant ($b = .114$, $p < .005$, $R^2_{adj} = .01$). In model 2, sex, educational level, and political affiliation were entered as control variables and willingness to voice opinion as the dependent variable; willingness to voice opinions about Obama's ethnicity remained the dependent variable. There was a significant correlation between willingness to voice opinions about Obama's ethnicity and trust in media controlling for the three variables in model 2 ($b = .114$, $p = .006$, $R^2_{adj} = .03$). While both model 1 and model 2 were significant; model 2 represented a significant improvement over model 1 ($F = 32.94$, $p < .001$), explaining 3% of the variance in willingness to voice opinions about Obama's ethnicity.

Table 2 : Regression model for research question

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Regressor | | |
| Intercept | 3.64** | 3.86** |
| Sex | | .07 |
| Level of Education | | -.05 |
| Political Affiliation | | -.08* |
| Trust in News | .11* | .11* |
| RSS | 715.07 | 672.31 |
| MSE | 1.29 | 1.29 |
| F | 8.03* | 3.91* |
| F | | 32.94 |
| R ² | .12 | .17 |
| R ² _{adj} | .01 | .30 |
| * $p < .01$ ** $p < .0001$ | | |

Discussion

This article examined the relationship between an individual's willingness to voice opinions about Obama's ethnicity and media trust. This section reviews major findings of the study, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, and limitations.

Findings

Overall, this study found a positive correlation ($R^2 = .12$, $p = .005$) between an individual's trust in media and their willingness to voice their opinion about Barack Obama's ethnicity. Therefore, generalizing to college-aged students, it is reasonable to assert that trust in media outlets does increase an individual's willingness to voice opinions on potentially controversial issues, such as candidate race. The study also revealed that the relationship between willingness to voice an opinion and media trust was stronger when controlling for sex, education and political affiliation ($F = 32.94$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .17$, $R^2_{adj} = .03$).

Theoretical implications

An important theoretical implication is the analysis of the role of media effect on voicing of opinions. The data illustrate the more consumers trust their media outlets the more likely they are to voice their opinions. This finding demonstrates an ability to overcome traditional silencing effects when discussing political opinions, in this case particularly a candidate's ethnicity. The importance of understanding how to predict and overcome a spiral of silence effect carries the political implications Noelle-Neumann (1974) stresses in her original research as it relates to her understanding of ability to speak and its relationship to media identification when forming an opinion.

An area of future research that should be explored is the further development of a causal relationship between media trust and willingness to voice an opinion. While research suggests media bias, perception and trust is linked to an individual's willingness to voice opinion (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Glynn, Hayes & Shanahan, 1997; Noelle-Neumann, 1977, 1984) further quasi-experimental evidence is needed to support such claims.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the use of self-report measurements, regularly used in communication research (Oetzel, 1998). Considering that the instrument asked individuals if they would be willing to discuss Obama's ethnicity

with others, individuals may have a tendency to answer questions in ways to make himself/herself appear more favorable, a social desirability tendency.

This study revealed a significant positive relationship between a student's trust in media and their willingness to voice an opinion about Barack Obama's ethnicity during the 2008 Presidential Campaign ($R^2 = .12$, $p < .01$). When controlling for other variables such as sex, education and political affiliation, the relationship between media trust and willingness to voice an opinion about Obama's ethnicity became even stronger ($R^2 = .17$, $p < .01$). These findings demonstrate the need to further understand the ways in which media impact a person's ability to speak or be silenced regarding issues of ethnic identity and intercultural/political communication. As the face of the American President has changed, so too has the global media landscape and its impact on discussions of race and identity.

3. References

- Behr, R. L., & Iyengar, S. (1985). *Television news, real-world cues, and changes in the public agenda*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 49(1), 38-57.
- Dearing, J.W. (1989). *Setting the polling agenda for the issue of AIDS*. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 53(3), 309-329.
- DeMaris, A. (2004). *Regression with social data: Modeling continuous and limited response variables*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dunne, M. (2008). *Black and white unite? The Clinton-Obama campaigns in historical perspective*. *Political Quarterly*, 79(3), 354-365.
- Eveland, W. P., & Shah, D. V. (2003). *The impact of individual and interpersonal factors on perceived news media bias*. *Political Psychology*, 24(1), 101-117.
- Glynn, C. J., Hayes, A. J., & Shanahan, J. (1997). *Perceived support for one's opinions and willingness to speak out: A meta-analysis of survey studies on the "Spiral of Silence"*. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 61(3), 452-463.
- Gonzenbach, W.J. (1992). *The conformity hypothesis: Empirical considerations for the spiral of silence's first link*. *Journalism Quarterly*, 69(3), 633-645.
- Henninger, D. (5, June 2008). *Obama's 'identity' beat Hillary's 'identity'*. *Wall Street Journal*, A19.
- Holmes, E. (28, February 2008). *Young America May Lift Democrats, Shape Agendas*. *Wall Street Journal*, A10.
- Jackson, R. L. (2004). *Negotiating and mediating: Constructions of racial identity*. *Review of Communication*, 4(1/2), 6-15.
- Jeffries, L. W., Neuendorf, K. A., & Atkin, D. (1999). *Spirals of silence: Expressing opinions when the climate of opinion is unambiguous*. *Political Communication*, 16, 115-131.
- Kaid, L. L., McKinney, M. S., & Tedesco, J. C. (2000). *Civic dialogue in the 1996 presidential campaign: Candidate, media, and public voices*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Katz, C., & Baldassare, M. (1992). *Using the "I-word" in public: A test of spiral of silence in conservative Orange County, California*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 56(2), 232-235.
- Kaufman, J. (3, May 2008). *Race on campus: Beyond Obama, the unity stops*. *Wall Street Journal*, A1-A7.
- Kim, S., Han, M., Shanahan, J., & Berdayes, V. (2004). *Talking on 'sunshine in North Korea': A test of the spiral of silence as a theory of powerful mass media*. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 16(1), 39-62.

16. Kimsey, W.D., & Hantz, A. M. (1978). *Decisional agenda of decided and undecided voters*. *Journal of Applied Communication*, 6(2), 65-72.
17. King, D. S., & Smith, R. M. (2008). *Strange bedfellows? Polarized politics?: The quest for racial equity in contemporary America*. *Political Research Quarterly*, 61(4), 686-703.
18. Lenart, S. (1994). *Shaping political attitudes the impact of interpersonal communication and mass media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
19. McCombs, M.E., Llamas, J.P., Lopez-Escobar, E., & Rey, F. (1997). *Candidate images in Spanish elections: Second-level agenda-setting effects*. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74(4), 703-717.
20. McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). *The agenda setting function of mass media*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.
21. Miah, M. (2009). *What Obama's victory means about race and class A landmark election result*. *Against the Current*, 23, 2-8.
22. Morse-Gagne, E. E. (2008). *Obama's campaign does matter to students*. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55, 32
23. Mutz, D.C. (1994). *Contextualizing personal experience: The role of mass media*. *The Journal of Politics*, 56(3), 689-714.
24. Neuwirth, K. (2000). *Testing the spiral of silence model: The case of Mexico*. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 12(2), 138-159.
25. Newport, F. (31, January 2008). *Race, ethnicity split Democratic vote patterns*. *Gallup Poll Briefing*, P2.
26. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). *The spiral of silence a theory of public opinion*. *Journal of Communication*, 24(2), 43-51.
27. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1977). *Turbulences in the climate of opinion: Methodological applications of the spiral of silence theory*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 41(2), 143-158.
28. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1979). *Public opinion and the classic tradition: A re-evaluation*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 43(2), 143-156.
29. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The spiral of silence—our social skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
30. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1985). *The spiral of silence: A response*. In K.L. Sanders, L.L. Kaid, & D. Nimmo (Eds.), *Political communication yearbook 1984* (pp. 66-94), Carbondale, IL. Southern Illinois University Press.
31. Noelle-Neumann, E. (2004). *The spiral of silence and the social nature of man*. In L.L. Kaid, (Ed.): *Handbook of political communication research* (pp. 339-356), Mahwah, NJ. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
32. Oetzel, J. (1998). *The effects of self-construals and ethnicity on self-reported conflict styles*. *Communication Reports*, 11, 133-144.
33. Salmon, C.T., & Kline, F.G. (1985). *The spiral of silence ten years later: An examination and evaluation*. In K.L. Sanders, L.L. Kaid, & D. Nimmo (Eds.): *Political communication yearbook 1984* (pp. 3-30), Carbondale, IL. Southern Illinois University Press.
34. Shamir, J. (1995). *Information cues and indicators of the climate of opinion: The spiral of silence theory in the Intifada*. *Communication Research*, 22(1), 24-53.
35. Spencer, A. T., & Croucher, S. M. (2008). *Basque nationalism and the spiral of silence: An analysis of public perceptions of ETA in Spain and France*. *International Communication Gazette*, 70, 137-153.
36. Taylor, D. G. (1982). *Pluralistic ignorance and the spiral of silence: A formal analysis*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 46(3), 311-335.
37. Wanta, W., Golan, G., & Lee, C. (2004). *Agenda setting and international news: Media influences on public perceptions of foreign nations*. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81(2), 364-377.
38. Weimann, G. (1992). *Modern terrorism the media and public opinion*. In S. Rothman (Ed.), *The mass media in liberal democratic societies* (pp. 103-120), New York. Paragon House Publishers.

