

Avoid a Spiral of Silence

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Controversial land use projects cannot only divide a community, they can dissuade people from getting engaged and publicly expressing their opinions.

The Spiral of Silence Theory, developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, maintains that people who hold a minority viewpoint are disinclined to express their opinions, whereas people who hold a majority viewpoint are inclined to do speak out. Moreover, Noelle-Neumann suggests that the media attention given to the majority viewpoint will augment these predispositions and create a spiral of silence for those possessing the minority viewpoint.[\[1\]](#)

Noelle-Neumann's theory is an extension of Solomon Asch's well-known conformity experiments. In these experiments, subjects were asked to name the line on the right that was equal to the line on the left in the following graphic (see Exhibit 1). However, participants were tested in the presence of the experimenter's assistants who all intentionally gave the incorrect answer. The results showed that a significant number of the participants gave the wrong answer due to the pressure they felt to agree with others.[\[2\]](#)

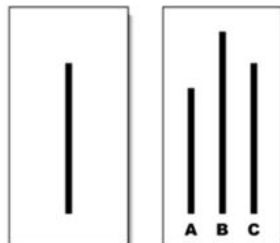


Exhibit 1

Noelle-Neumann further tested this concept by applying it to moral and aesthetic convictions. For instance, she found that smokers were less willing to overtly support smokers' rights in the presence of non-smokers.[\[3\]](#) Given these results, it is easy to see how residents who support a land use project that might be perceived as controversial would have an aversion to publicly expressing support for the proposal.