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Running Head: SPIRAL OF SILENCE AND THE IRAQ WAR

The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Spiral of Silence, Public Opinion and the Iraq War: Factors Influencing

One's Willingness to Express their Opinion

by

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SPIRAL OF SILENCE, PUBLIC OPINION AND THE IRAQ WAR: FACTORS
INFLUENCING ONE'S WILLINGNESS TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINION

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Discussing controversial issues may be hard for some individuals because they fear they may become isolated. The Iraq War serves as one such controversy in which some individuals might avoid publicly expressing their opinion. Spiral of silence, a communication theory set forth by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann can be used to explain why some individuals will publicly express their opinion of the Iraq War while others will not. A Web-based survey was distributed to Rochester Institute of Technology faculty, staff and students. This study investigated public opinion expression through interactive forms of media such as discussion forums, blogs and Web sites.

Keywords: Spiral of Silence, Public Opinion, Iraq War, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

Spiral of Silence, Public Opinion and the Iraq War: Factors Influencing

One's Willingness to Express their Opinion

The Iraq War, as well as affirmative action, same sex-marriage and stem cell research, are controversial issues today. Activists on any side of a controversial topic publicly express their positions. Those who supported the Iraq War believed the United States military involvement could destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program as well as put an end to Saddam Hussein's regime and its threat to international security and peace. Now in the fifth year of military intervention in Iraq, Saddam Hussein is dead and, according to the U.S. government, there was little or no evidence of weapons of mass destruction; support for the war has turned to the creation of a democratic government. Individuals who oppose the Iraq War argue that our government has no right to intervene in another country's internal affairs and there was not strong evidence of the presence of weapons of mass destruction, perhaps the main reason for U.S. military invasion. In addition, activists argued that international law was violated because the United Nations did not approve the invasion. Individuals who feel strongly about publicly advancing their ideas on the Iraq War may become activists because they are not afraid to express their opinions. On the other hand, some individuals may choose not to publicly discuss their opinion on the war, whether they agree with it or not, because they feel there is not enough public support for their view.

The public debate about the Iraq War has left Americans deeply divided. Support and opposition has come from many individuals, including military personnel, members of Congress, presidential candidates, soldiers, religious persons and countries around the world. The Iraq War has proved to be a controversial topic and is an ideal context to test selected research questions derived from the spiral of silence theory.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory helps to explain why particular individuals are more willing to publicly express their opinions while others choose not to disclose their opinions. With regard to controversial topics, people may choose to remain silent based on their perception of whether they will only be shared by a minority. Fear of isolation, a component of spiral of silence theory, is thought to occur because individuals perceive that voicing their opinion will isolate them from society and/or their peer groups. Individuals may feel that if they express their opinions thought to be outside of the mainstream they will become isolated. Other factors, such as the perceived level of controversy of the topic, the person's political involvement, and their exposure to media coverage and demographic characteristics, may influence an individual's willingness to speak out.

Public opinion has been defined as "those opinions which one is willing to express in a public setting or forum" (Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990, p. 567). At the heart of spiral of silence theory is the idea of public opinion and its relationship to one's

willingness to openly disclose an opinion. In the early 1970s, when Noelle-Neumann advanced her theory, public opinion expression took the form of interpersonal discussions between individuals or traditional media communication such as those expressed in radio and television. With face-to-face interaction one does not remain anonymous, leaving them to publicly display themselves and their opinion. At the present time, mass media have grown significantly, assisted by the introduction of the Internet. Mass media now include such venues as personal Web sites, blogs, discussion forums and social networking Web sites. These media provide Internet users a venue to post information and discuss their opinions with the public. What is different is that individuals can choose a username that allows them to remain unidentified to readers.

The present study explores spiral of silence theory and the factors contributing to an individual's willingness to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War, with a focus on the influence of public opinion perception, mass media use and interpersonal relationships. The research questions for the study are:

RQ 1: To what extent do individuals' self-reported perception of public opinion about the Iraq War influence their willingness of public expression of an opinion on the subject?

RQ 2: What is the relationship between individuals' self-reported use of mass media and their willingness to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War?

RQ 3: What is the relationship between individuals' family and close friends and their willingness to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War?

RQ 4: What is the difference between faculty/staff versus college students' use of mass media and their willingness to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War?

Project Rationale

The present study has the potential to explain how public opinion and its perception can influence legislation. Legislative action is often influenced by activists publicly demanding that the government respond to and act on a specific issue. The Iraq War is a controversial issue in society, which makes it difficult for some government officials to take a specific position. Activists work to advance their opinions to effect legislative change by organizing rallies, creating petitions and presenting their opinions before the public eye. With the introduction of the Internet, new outlets have become available for individuals to express their opinions about controversial topics; these new outlets afford the individual a venue in which they can remain anonymous to readers. This offers another social merit of the present study. Opinions are now shared

on the Internet by way of postings in forums, blogs and Websites, and individuals may use this as another way to scan the environment to determine whether their opinions are held by a majority or minority. The Internet may provide a new venue to those who have similar opinions and can be used to publicly advance their own opinions. It may also provide an opportunity to those individuals who are reluctant about voicing their opinion.

The use of spiral of silence theory and its relationship to public opinion expression regarding controversial issues provides the scholarly merit of the present study. Previous research on spiral of silence theory addressed public opinion in terms of face-to-face interaction; therefore the concept of the Internet and its influence on one's willingness to express their opinion in a different context is new. The Internet is a public venue to discuss opinions, yet other studies have examined public opinion in the context of group interactions and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the present study investigates mass media use and interpersonal interaction of faculty/staff and students at RIT and the subsequent influence on the expression of public opinion. Within the context of spiral of silence theory, previous research analyzed one select group of similar individuals. The present study looks at two groups of different individuals and how their use of the Internet has influenced willingness to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War.

Review of Literature

Spiral of Silence Theory

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the originator of spiral of silence theory, studied the relationship between the information environment, opinion climates and what she termed “spiral of silence.” According to Noelle-Neumann, individuals scan the information environment to determine whether their personal opinion on a specific issue is shared or not shared with others (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The information environment is comprised of news stories, opinion articles and other forms of media content. Spiral of silence theory states that if after scanning the information environment, one finds their opinion is supported by many, one will be more disposed to express one’s opinions in public. On the other hand, if “upon finding only minority support...individuals will be unwilling to express their opinions in public because of fear associated with expressing unpopular views” (Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990, p. 567). The spiral of silence occurs when those who are unwilling to express their opinions increasingly remain silent on the issue. In some cases, one’s identity may be motivation enough to ignore the concept of minority opinion and express their opinions so they can define themselves and influence the opinions of others. This is what Noelle-Neumann termed the “hard core” (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001) because they choose not to conform to society, do not want to be silenced by the majority and will not change their

opinions. Jeffres, Neuendorf and Atkin (1999) also found that the mass media play a key role in identification of majority and minority opinion and the spiral of silence process. Mass media offer venues for individuals to create a perception of the national climate of opinion. Additionally, the media serve three functions for public opinion: (a) set the agenda of public discussion, (b) convey information to audience members on the climate of opinion regarding an issue, and (c) provide arguments for one or both sides of an issue (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001).

Research has found that other factors besides perceived minority and majority support also influence expression of one's opinion, what Salmon and Neuwirth (1990) identified as "contingent conditions." Opinion climates come from both national media and local media; individuals are influenced more by a combination of opinion climates rather than a single one. Individuals may feel they are more likely to be isolated in a community setting with local media, as opposed to a national setting with the influence of national media. Two more contingent conditions of spiral of silence theory are socioeconomic status and motivation. Socioeconomic status refers to individuals with differing levels of education, professional status, income and access to variables, such as mass media use and opportunities for acquiring new information (Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990). For spiral of silence theory, if one possesses high involvement or concern for the

issue, Salmon and Neuwirth (1990) found they are motivated to seek out information and are more likely to become involved.

Moy, Domke and Stamm (2001) studied affirmative action and the influence of the spiral of silence on people's willingness to discuss the controversial topic publicly. Two components vital to their study of affirmative action are fear of isolation and reference groups. Fear of isolation, a contingent condition of the theory as identified by the researchers, "is the motivating factor determining whether and individual speaks out or not, particularly on topics that are morally laden and controversial" (Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001, p. 8). This is one factor that assists in determining whether an individual will publicly express their opinion or chooses to remain silent. The researchers also identified reference groups as a second component to the theory. Reference groups describe the influence of an individual's peer groups and how this may have more influence on isolation than society. These peer groups may be comprised of friends, family, co-workers and/or neighbors. Within society, the range of opinions are so diverse that the chances of approval of opinions by others is greater; therefore, fear of isolation may not have as large an impact. On the other hand, the opinions of peer/primary groups tend not to be as diverse because individuals identify themselves with like others, so fear of isolation may become a more meaningful concern.

Salmon and Neuwirth's (1990) study on opinion climates and willingness to discuss the issue of abortion involved seven hypotheses that were tested by telephone interviews in 1986 with 432 residents of Madison, Wisconsin. Their findings found no difference between local opinion climate and national opinion climate's impact on public expression of opinion. Their hypotheses on socioeconomic status and motivation, however, were supported; it was noted that knowledge of a topic and personal involvement with the issue influences discussion of opinion.

Lasorsa (1991) argued that outspokenness on political issues is not only affected by an individual's perception of the climate of opinion, but also by their interest in politics, correctness and self-efficacy. Political outspokenness can depend on a number of factors. How salient is the issue? How directly involved is the individual? How morally laden is the issue? Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann argued that individuals look at whether the issue is the "right" thing to do as opposed to the "good" thing to do, and in most cases all political issues have a "moral" dimension (cited in Lasorsa, 1991). Correctness refers to an individual's conviction that their position is correct. Self-efficacy is defined as "confidence in one's ability to change things beyond oneself" and refers to "the general perception that one has the potential for effecting change in the greater environment" (p. 134). Individuals who believe they have the ability to make a

difference should be more likely to express their opinion rather than those who do not believe they do.

It was also mentioned by Lasorsa (1991) that previous studies on the spiral of silence theory by Noelle-Neumann argued that mass media perform three functions to form public opinion, and individual media use is not taken into account. The three functions are: agenda-setting (mass media tells people what to think about), legitimation (media reports one's own opinion thus acting as confirmation) and articulation (help people put opinions into words). Lasorsa (1991) disagreed with Noelle-Neumann and brings individual mass media use into the equation. She stated

those who use the news media frequently, and those who attend to political news in particular, should feel more certain about the correctness of their positions, and therefore should be more willing to take a stand publicly in a hostile environment (pp. 135-136).

Factors other than demographics, fear of isolation and reference groups, to name a few, can influence an individual to be more outspoken when the issue involves politics. Individuals interested and involved in politics tend to speak out regardless, according to Lasorsa (1991). Additionally, those who believe what they say can make a difference and believe that their position on the issue is correct may also be more likely to speak out and go against the spiral of silence.

Public opinion

In early research, Noelle-Neumann defined public opinion as “the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behavior in that it threatens the dissenting individual with isolation” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44). Public opinion involves a faction of individuals speaking while others remain silent. To analyze and test public opinion formation, Noelle-Neumann offered five hypotheses. The first includes the trend of opinions in the social environment. One will observe their social environment based on interest of the issue and the degree of exposing themselves to the public (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The second hypothesis looks at an individual’s willingness to express an opinion publicly due to identification with a dominant view within the social environment, later on defined as majority and minority public opinion. Noelle-Neumann’s third hypothesis posits “if the assessment of the current distribution of opinion and the actual distribution are clearly divergent, it is because the opinion whose strength is overestimated is displayed more in public” (1974, p. 45). This hypothesis is deduced from the first and second. Present assessment of public opinion is addressed in the fourth hypothesis. This states that one will feel that if the present opinion is the majority then it is more likely to be the future opinion as well (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The final hypothesis is a continuation of the fourth and provides implications for future assessment of public opinion. The future assessment of public

opinion will influence the degree of expression of public opinion, as well as fear of isolation and self-confidence. Fear of isolation and self-confidence of an individual will become jeopardized if their opinion is not with the majority opinion or the trend (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Christen and Gunther (2003) studied the projection effect and its influence on public opinion formation. The projection effect, also referred to as the projection bias or the looking glass effect, is an individual's predisposition to view their own opinion as common in society while opposing or alternative opinions are viewed as less common. The researchers identified four theoretical explanations for the projection effect as a basis of their study, conducted in previous research by Marks and Miller (1987).

Selective exposure and cognitive availability guide the first perspective that "perceptions of similarity are affected by the ease with which evidence of similarity is accessed from memory" (Marks & Miller, 1987, p. 72). In other words, individuals tend to associate with others who hold similar viewpoints, therefore increasing instances of agreement for one's position. The second perspective is salience and focus of attention; salience refers to an individual being actively involved with the issue at hand. Marks and Miller (1987) stated that "focus of attention on one's preferred position, as opposed to alternative positions, may increase estimates of consensus for one's endorsement" (p. 73). The third perspective, logical information processing, involves an individual

attributing a cause of behavior to situational factors. As a result, they assume that the situation and the response would be similar among themselves and others. Motivation, the final perspective, may produce the following effect: “perceiving similarity between self and particular targets may bolster perceived social support, validate the correctness or appropriateness of a position, maintain self-esteem, maintain or restore cognitive balance, or reduce tension associated with anticipated social interaction” (Marks & Miller, 1987, p. 73). These factors assist in the perception of one’s similarity to others. These four perspectives assisted the researchers in determining media coverage bias and the effects of personal opinion on four recent controversies. The four controversies the study addressed were genetically altered foods, hazards of radon gas, physician-assisted suicide and Earth being visited by intelligent beings from outer space. Christen and Gunther (2003) found that selective exposure was supported by data extracted from telephone interviews with a nationwide random sample of 760 United States adults. The second perspective of salience and focus of attention was not supported and only for the instance of genetically engineered foods was there support for the perspective of motivation. Additionally, the logical information processing hypothesis was also not supported.

Public expression of opinion and its relation to media coverage of an issue has previously been analyzed using the agenda setting theory (Perse, McLeod, Signorielli &

Dee, 1997). This theory holds that there is a positive relationship between the public's perception about an issue's importance and the amount of media coverage.

Additionally, the media agenda influences and becomes influenced by the opinions that the public holds, as well as the public expression of opinion. The researchers identified abortion as one such issue. They found that the majority of public support abortion for "hard" reasons, which include rape and threat to a women's health, and minority of public support for "soft" reasons, such as a women not being able to afford raising a child. Perse, McLeon, Signorielli and Dee (1997) used content analysis to analyze newspaper coverage of abortion in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Their study was an examination of media coverage of abortion, occurrence of abortion and public opinion of the issue. Three of their hypotheses stated there would be a positive relationship between the number of abortions performed and media coverage, as well as public opinion of abortion. There would also be a positive relationship between public opinion and media coverage of abortion. The researchers discovered that there was no relationship between the number of legal abortions performed in the United States, news media coverage of abortion in the selected newspapers and public opinion. Additionally, greater media coverage in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* led to more restrictive opinions of abortion, showing support for the third hypothesis.

Adam Berinsky and James Druckman (2007) argued that traditionally politicians ignored public opinion when crafting policies. They believed that the public lacked the awareness and knowledge needed to form coherent opinions on foreign policy. Recently this has changed. Politicians are now seeing that the public has the ability to form coherent opinions on foreign policy and are responding to this; their foreign policies are now being influenced by their understanding of how the public feels. The Iraq War is one example of a controversial issue where public opinion and opinion polls play a big role in constructing foreign policy. Berinsky and Druckman (2007) supported this statement by citing President Bush's speech given on November 30, 2005 which outlined the future strategy for the Iraq War. Within Bush's speech he "heavily emphasized the concept of 'victory' by using the word 'victory' 15 times, posting 'Plan for Victory' signs on the podium, and entitling an accompanying National Security Council Report 'National Strategy for Victory in Iraq'" (Berinsky & Druckman, 2007, p. 127). The victory theme chosen by President Bush was influenced by public opinion survey results and what he believed would persuade the public to believe the war would be successful.

Public opinion importance was also stressed by Christie (2006) as far as the successful outcome of a war. Public opinion was defined in his study by "the combined personal opinions of adults toward issues of relevance to government" and public

support was defined as “overall support of the government’s handling of an overarching issue” (Christie, 2006, p. 520). He argued that modern mass media are now playing a new role in maintaining and influencing public opinion as well as public support. This can be seen with the change in the Iraq War. Initially public support was high due to President Bush’s administration ability to gain Congressional support; as the war carried on it was difficult for the administration to maintain support, so the focus turned to the role of mass media in doing so. Christie (2006) also stated the lack of modern mass media “can impair a nation’s ability to sustain its effort” (p. 520). This was seen during the Vietnam War when there was negative media coverage and public opinion was low as far as its successful outcome. The Vietnam War is also mentioned in this study in terms of the dynamics of public opinion, public policy and mass media. Christie (2006) mentioned that interest and public support for the Vietnam War changed dramatically when the tone of reporting by the mass media changed.

Method

The participants for the present study were a convenience sample of Rochester Institute of Technology students, faculty and staff members. Three undergraduate classes, one graduate class and all current faculty and staff members were surveyed. An email cover letter with a Web-based survey was distributed to the individuals (Appendix C and D). This type of survey was chosen because each individual has a

registered RIT email address and can receive the survey. The items that comprise the survey were chosen by criteria set forth by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) and her study on spiral of silence theory with controversial subjects. Noelle-Neumann (1974) suggests that a survey to study spiral of silence theory on controversial topics and public opinion should include questions about: (a) the respondent's opinion on a controversial subject, (b) the respondent's view of what the majority think about a subject, and (c) the respondent's willingness to expose him or herself in a public situation. Reliability and validity were estimated by providing the survey to a group of individuals similar to the sample used for the study. The survey was given to the group one time, and then exactly a week later the survey was given to the same group of individuals again in order to determine the degree to which the instrument performs the same way both times. Respondents were asked whether they believe the questions are measuring what the survey is asking of them.

Topic of the Iraq War

Respondents were asked their opinion on the Iraq War. One question was provided that asked the respondents' opinion on the Iraq War, whether they supported, opposed or were unsure of the war. A second question asked how strongly they felt about their position on the Iraq War. A 5-point response scale of "very strong" to "not strong at all" was given. These two questions shed light on the individual's position on

the controversial topic of the Iraq War. Additionally, the responses were used to assess one's opinion on the Iraq War. These questions were needed in order to determine where one's opinion fell in relation to the public, their friends and family, as well as the majority and minority of opinion.

Perceptions of Climate of Opinion

Borrowing survey questions from Moy, Domke and Stamm (2001) respondents were asked about the climate of opinion surrounding their close friends and family. Questions 4, 5 and 6 asked the respondents what percentage of the public did they believe support, oppose or are unsure about their position on the Iraq War; additionally, questions 7, 8 and 9 asked respondents what percentage of their close friends and family did they believe support, oppose or are unsure about their position on the Iraq War. For these questions four percentage responses were provided that ranged from 0 to 25, 26 to 50, 51 to 75 and 76 to 100%. An additional question asked the respondent what percentage of the public did they believe agrees with their position on the Iraq War and were given four responses ranging from 0 to 25, 26 to 50, 51 to 75 and 76 to 100. These questions serve to assess an individual's perception of the climate of opinion for the public, friends and family, as well as public opinion support or lack of support on the topic of the Iraq War. According to spiral of silence theory, perception of climate of opinion influences an individual's likelihood of public expression of their

opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Furthermore, these questions can be analyzed with the questions provided in the previous section, topic of the Iraq War, to determine whether one's opinions are within the majority or minority of opinion.

Willingness to Speak Out

Questions in this section of the survey look at whether individuals will express their opinion in a social gathering where face-to-face interaction is occurring, as well as on the Internet where individuals can remain anonymous. Willingness to speak out by the respondent is measured with the following two items:

Imagine that you're at some kind of social gathering where you don't know anyone. You're talking to a group of people when someone brings up the issue of the Iraq War. From the discussion, you can tell that most people in the group do not support your point of view. In this kind of situation, some people would express their opinions, while others would not. How likely would you be to express your opinion on the Iraq War in a situation like this?

Now imagine you are on a Website with a discussion board where people are posting their opinions about the Iraq War. You can see that most people do not support your point of view. How likely would you be to express your opinion on the Iraq War in a situation like this?

The respondents were given a 5-point scale, 1 = extremely likely to 5 = not at all likely, with which to represent their opinion. A third question which asked “how strongly do you feel about your position on the Iraq War” was provided to the respondent, and a 5-point response scale of very strong to not strong at all was given. According to previous research, willingness to speak out is influenced by how strongly a person feels about their position on a topic; therefore, this question is included in the study. Two additional questions, 12 and 13, address the Internet and whether they would express their opinion whether respondents remain anonymous with a username or their real name was displayed in the online discussion. These two questions also address the issue of an individual’s willingness to speak out.

Fear of Isolation

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) spiral of silence theory notes that fear of isolation by the public and/or friends and family influences one’s willingness to publicly express their opinion on a controversial topic. Lee, Detenber, Willnat, Aday and Graf (2004) divide fear of isolation into social isolation (being isolated by others) and opinion isolation (being isolated because of a certain opinion). Borrowing from their study on spiral of silence theory, eight statements are included in the survey in order to assess the possible impact of fear of isolation on their expression of their opinion on abortion. The statements provided to the respondents in the survey are: (a) I

worry that others might not like me, (b) I worry about being alone, (c) I worry about not having anyone to talk to, (d) people say things they don't believe so that they will be accepted by others, (e) people will change what they say if others seem to feel differently, (f) if I think others have views on important issues that are different from mine, I will not voice my true thoughts publicly, (g) if people disagree with me, I worry about being isolated, and (h) I worry about not being accepted by others. A 5-point response scale ranging from "always" to "never" was provided.

Interpersonal Relationships and Media Use

As identified, the present study analyzed the impact of interpersonal relationships and mass media use on public opinion expression. Interpersonal relationships were included in the survey because this is where opinion expression would be in the form of face-to-face interaction. Mass media in the form of an individual stating their given name, as well as mass media in the form of anonymity are included to analyze whether either has an impact on opinion expression. Two questions were provided to the respondents which asked how comfortable they felt discussing their opinions on the Iraq War with family members and closest friends. A response scale of "very comfortable" to "not very comfortable" was provided. Two additional questions asked the respondent, on a response scale of "extremely likely" to "not at all likely", how likely they would be to discuss their opinion the Iraq War with family

members and closest friends knowing that they did not hold the same opinion.

Respondents were also asked four questions in regard to discussion of opinion through mass media. Questions 26 and 27 asked whether the respondent would use or do use discussion forums, blogs, personal web sites, social networking web sites and other to discuss controversial topics, whether they remain anonymous or not. Questions 28 and 29 asked whether the respondent would use or do use radio, television, newspaper/magazine opinion article and other to discuss controversial topics, again whether they remain anonymous or not. For all four questions respondents were able to check all forms of mass media that apply.

Demographic Characteristics

The respondents were asked several demographic variables, which included whether they are a faculty/staff or student at RIT, their sex, age and ethnicity. These questions were included in the study to afford the reader a description of the sample and are used for statistical purposes as well. The question of whether the respondent is a faculty/staff or student at RIT was provided in order to answer the fourth research question in the study; this question looks at the possible public opinion expression differences due to use of mass media between the two groups.

Results

A total of 571 web-based surveys were completed for analysis. Of the 571 surveys, 56 (10.2%) respondents stated they were R.I.T. students while the majority was Faculty/Staff with 507 respondents (88.8%). In addition, 70.8% of the respondents (404) stated they opposed the war, 19.3% (110) supported the war and 9.9% (57) were unsure of their opinion on the Iraq War.

Research question one addressed self-reported perception of public opinion about the Iraq War and its influence on their willingness of public expression of opinion. Spearman's Rho tests were run on survey questions that addressed an individual's perception of public opinion and how willing they were to express their own opinion. There was a strong correlation between how strongly an individual felt on their position of the Iraq War and the percentage of the public they believe agrees with their opinion ($r = -.24$, $p = .000$). For the question of "How strongly do you feel about your position on the Iraq War?" very strong was coded as 1 to not strong at all being coded as 5.

Willingness to speak out was also addressed in the survey in terms of expressing one's opinion on a Weblog where they remain anonymous or their name is displayed. There were very strong relationships between how strongly the respondent felt on their position of the Iraq War and if they would express their opinion on a site with just a

username ($r = .25, p = .000$) and if the respondent no longer was anonymous ($r = .28, p = .000$). The percentage of the public that the respondent believed agreed with their opinion on the Iraq War was slightly positively correlated with whether any individual would express their opinion on a Weblog or any other personal Website where they remain anonymous ($r = -.09, p = .037$). There was no significant relationship between the percentage of the public that the respondent believes agrees with their opinion and whether the individual would post their opinion on a website where their real name was displayed.

Research question two looks at an individual's self-reported use of mass media and their willingness to publicly express their opinion. Spearman's Rho tests were run on survey questions that addressed an individual's mass media use and strongly they felt on their position. There were significant relationships with multiple forms of mass media that the respondent currently uses or would use to discuss the Iraq War and how strongly they feel about their position. In terms of interactive forms of mass media, there was discussion forms they currently use ($r = -.14, p = .001$) and would use ($r = -.17, p = .000$), blogs they currently use ($r = -.18, p = .000$) and would use ($r = -.16, p = .000$) and personal Web sites they would use ($r = -.15, p = .001$). There was also a significant relationship between how strongly a respondent felt on their opinion and if

they do currently use social networking Web sites to discuss the topic ($r = -.12$, $p = .010$) or if they would ($r = -.14$, $p = .001$).

In terms of traditional forms of mass media (radio, TV and newspaper/magazine opinion article) there were multiple significant relationships as well. Depending on how strongly the respondent felt on their opinion of the Iraq War they currently use radio ($r = -.15$, $p = .001$), television ($r = -.12$, $p = .004$) and newspaper/magazine opinion article ($r = -.19$, $p = .000$) to discuss their opinion. There were also positive correlations with the traditional forms of mass media the respondent would use to discuss the controversial topic. This includes radio ($r = -.25$, $p = .000$), television ($r = -.23$, $p = .000$) and newspaper/magazine opinion article ($r = -.27$, $p = .000$).

In terms of media use in general, 52% of respondents would use discussion forums to express their opinion on the Iraq War. Blogs (29.8%) and social networking sites (25.8%) were also cited as possible ways for public opinion expression. Fewer respondents actually use interactive forms of mass media for public opinion expression: discussion forums (31.2%), blog (17.0%) and social networking sites (14%). In terms of traditional forms of mass media a little more than half of the total number of respondents (62.3%) uses either radio, TV and/or a newspaper/magazine opinion article. Possible reasons as stated by respondents for not using traditional or interactive forms of mass media for public opinion expression include not caring about remaining

anonymous, not wanting to discuss politics via mass media, not wanting to discuss politics altogether or not using the Internet this way to discuss topics online with other individuals. Other forms of mass media that were used by respondents include instant messenger, call in shows, moveon.org, letters/emails to government and Congress, voting booths, political Websites, anti war rallies and special interest groups.

The relationship between an individual's willingness to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War and family members and close friends is presented in Table 1. The majority of respondents reported they were very comfortable expressing their opinion with family members (62%) as well as close friends (64%).

Table 1

Percentage of respondents that will express their opinion with family members and close friends

Climate of Opinion	Family Members	Close Friends
Very comfortable	61%	60%
Comfortable	23%	25%
Somewhat comfortable	10%	9%
Not very comfortable	5%	3%

There was a significant relationship between an individual's opinion on the Iraq War and the percent of their close friends and family they believe support the Iraq War ($r = .200$, $p = .000$) or oppose if Iraq War ($r = -.27$, $p = .000$). Results of the survey show a significant relationship between the percentage of close friends and family the respondent believe support the war and how likely they would be to discuss their

opinion with their family members if they knew they did not hold the same opinion ($r = .10$, $p = .021$), as well as closest friends ($r = .10$, $p = .026$). There was a significant relationship between how strongly the respondent felt on their position of the war and how likely they would discuss with family members ($r = .15$, $p = .000$) and closest friends ($r = .25$, $p = .000$) who did not hold the same opinion.

The difference between faculty/staff versus college students' use of mass media and their willingness to publicly express their opinion on the war were also addressed in the survey. More faculty/staff respondents than students were unsure of whether they would express their opinion on the Iraq War on a Weblog or personal Website where their real name was displayed as opposed to just a username being shown (38.9%). In terms of interactive forms of mass media, faculty/staff respondents were more likely to use discussion forums instead of blogs, personal web sites or social networking web sites. Newspapers were the most common form of traditional mass media used by faculty/staff at 53.3%. College students on the other hand were more willing to express their opinion on the Iraq War on a Weblog or personal Website where they remain anonymous (50%). For the survey questions relating to whether students would use interactive forms of mass media, the majority of respondents for each set of questions would not use that as a way to publicly express their opinion on the Iraq War. This includes discussion forums, blogs, personal Web sites and social networking Web

sites. About half of the respondents (30) would use the radio and half (35) would use the newspaper. These results show that even with varying forms of interactive mass media at hand, college students would still seek out traditional forms to express their opinion on the Iraq War.

Conclusion

Public opinion and perception of it can influence whether individuals will be more willing to express their opinion on a controversial topic, the central idea to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory. The present study sought to investigate the relationship between RIT faculty, staff and students, public opinion perception, interpersonal relationships and mass media use and public expression of opinion. Components of the spiral of silence theory were analyzed to determine their impact on expression of one's opinion on the Iraq War. The survey used for this study asked about the controversial subject of the Iraq War creating a limitation to this project. Personal interest and concern may influence one's willingness to discuss the topic. The strategies and reasons of the Iraq War have changed since its beginning, leaving individuals open to changing their positions on support or opposition to the war. In addition, the group selection and their corresponding findings were limited to this study; the sample selection was convenient for the study, and characteristics of the faculty, staff and students completing the surveys also limit this study. The survey

attempted to gauge behavior by asking people how they thought they would behave in a hypothetical situation, another limitation to the study. Discussion of politics and climate of opinion may vary with the social setting. A fourth limitation is the instrumentation used. A Web-based survey distributed by email can be subjected to having multiple responses from the same individual, skewing responses.

Future research should address the limitation of Web-based surveys by using interviews in order to obtain information about what the present study is addressing. In addition, future research could look at activist groups for and against the Iraq War and where they choose to express their opinions. With this, research could analyze where those individuals who feel that they are a part of the minority of opinion are scanning their environment for agreement of opinion and how they could use the other identified venues to their benefit. This study looks at an individual's public opinion expression in different forms of media whether or not they define themselves as an activist for the Iraq War. Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory and the concept of public opinion was advanced in the early 1970s; research since that time has focused on public opinion expression in terms of interpersonal relationships and face-to-face interaction. Using the present study as a pilot, future research should further look into the use of the Internet and its influence on opinion expression of controversial topics. Internet venues and how

people use them to discuss their opinions, as well as how it can be used to assess the majority and minority of opinion should be addressed in future research.

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Appendix A – Email Cover Letter

Subject: Please take my survey for Masters Thesis Research

Fellow RIT community members,

I know that the RIT campus is going to be busy the next two weeks with Orientation and the beginning of Fall quarter, but it would be greatly appreciated if you could complete a survey for my thesis research. This study investigates the Iraq War and public opinion expression. The survey should only take about 5 minutes. Provided is a link to the survey titled "The Iraq War and Opinion Expression", <http://clipboard.rit.edu/takeSurvey.cfm?id=3w54n8>. Just click the link and it will take you directly to the survey. Please complete the survey by September 9th.

The survey is voluntary and if at any time you choose to not complete the survey you may do so. Additionally, the data from this survey will remain confidential and participation will remain anonymous. I am grateful for your willingness to participate in this survey. If you have any questions or concerns that I may answer please feel free to contact me at jld5160@rit.edu.

Again, thank you for your participation. Your help is very much appreciated!

Sincerely,
Jessica Drake

Department of Communication
Communication and Media Technologies

Appendix B – Survey

The Iraq War and Opinion Expression

The following survey asks you questions regarding your opinion on the Iraq War and public opinion expression. Your name and your answers will remain confidential. No one other than the study director will see them. Thank you in advance for taking your time to complete the survey.

1. What is your opinion on the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ I support the war
- ☐ I oppose the war
- ☐ I am not sure

Part I. Next are questions that ask about your perceptions of other peoples opinion on the Iraq War and willingness to speak out. Please select the response that you feel is most accurate.

2. How strongly do you feel about your position on the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ Very strong
- ☐ Somewhat strong
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Not too strong
- ☐ Not strong at all

3. What percentage of the public do you believe agrees with your opinion on the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent

- ☐ 51 to 75 percent
- ☐ 76 to 100 percent

4. Independent of how you personally feel about the Iraq War, what percentage of the public do you believe supports the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent
- ☐ 51 to 74 percent
- ☐ 75 to 100 percent

5. Independent of how you personally feel about the Iraq War, what percentage of the public do you believe opposes the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent
- ☐ 51 to 75 percent
- ☐ 76 to 100 percent

6. Independent of how you personally feel about the Iraq War, what percentage of the public do you believe is unsure about their position on the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent
- ☐ 51 to 75 percent
- ☐ 76 to 100 percent

7. Independent of how you personally feel about the Iraq War, what percentage of your close friends and family do you believe support the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent
- ☐ 51 to 75 percent
- ☐ 76 to 100 percent

8. Independent of how you personally feel about the Iraq War, what percentage of your close friends and family do you believe oppose the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent
- ☐ 51 to 75 percent
- ☐ 76 to 100 percent

9. Independent of how you personally feel about the Iraq War, what percentage of your close friends and family do you believe is unsure about their position on the Iraq War? (Select one response)

- ☐ 0 to 25 percent
- ☐ 26 to 50 percent
- ☐ 51 to 75 percent
- ☐ 76 to 100 percent

10.

Instructions: Select one response

Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
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Imagine that you're at some kind of social gathering where you don't know anyone. You're talking to a group of people when someone brings up the issue of the Iraq War.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
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From the discussion, you can tell that most people in the group do not support your point of view. In this kind of situation, some people would express their opinions, while others would not. How likely would you be to express your opinion on the Iraq War in a situation like this?

11.

Instructions: Select one response

Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
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Now imagine you are on a website with a discussion board where people are posting their opinions about the Iraq War. You can see that most people do not support your point of view. How likely would you be to express your opinion on the Iraq War in a situation like this?

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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12. Would you publicly express your opinion on the Iraq War on a weblog or any other personal website where you remain anonymous with just a username? (Select one response)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

13. Would you publicly express your opinion on the Iraq War on a weblog or any other personal website if your real name was displayed and you were no longer anonymous? (Select one response)

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

14.

Instructions: Select one response for each item

	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Not very comfortable
How comfortable do you feel discussing your opinions on the Iraq War with your family members?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How comfortable do you feel discussing your opinions on the Iraq War with your closest friends?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15.

Instructions: Select one response for each item

	Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
How likely would you discuss your opinion on the Iraq War with your family members if you knew that they did not hold the same opinion as you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How likely would you discuss	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
---------------------	----------------	--------------------	-----------------------	-------------------------

your opinion on the Iraq War
with your closest friends if you
knew that they did not hold the
same opinion as you?

16. Part II. The next set of items is a series of statements. For each statement please select the response that you feel is most accurate.

Instructions: Select one response for each item

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I worry that others might not like me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry about being alone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry about not having anyone to talk to	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People say things they don't believe so that they will be accepted by others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People will change what they say if others seem to feel differently	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I think others have views on important issues that are different from mine, I will not voice my true thoughts publicly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If people disagree with me, I worry about being isolated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I worry about not being accepted by others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Part III. The following questions ask about media use. Please select the response(s) that you feel are most accurate.

17. Which of the following would you use to discuss controversial topics, such as the Iraq War, where your real name would remain anonymous? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Discussion forums
- ☐ Blogs
- ☐ Personal web sites
- ☐ Social networking web sites
- ☐

18. Which of the following do you use to discuss controversial topics, such as the Iraq War, where your real name remains anonymous? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Discussion forums
- ☐ Blogs
- ☐ Personal web sites
- ☐ Social networking web sites
- ☐

19. Which of the following would you use to discuss controversial topics, such as the Iraq War, where you would have to identify your real name? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Radio
- ☐ Television
- ☐ Newspaper/Magazine opinion article
- ☐

20. Which of the following do you use to discuss controversial topics, such as the Iraq War, where you identify your real name? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Radio
- ☐ Television
- ☐ Newspaper/Magazine opinion article
- ☐

Part IV. Finally, please respond to four questions.

21. Are you: (Check one response)

- ☐ Faculty/Staff
- ☐ Student

22. Are you: (Check one response)

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

23. What was your age on your last birthday?

24. What is your race or ethnicity? (Check one response)

- ☐ Caucasian
- ☐ African-American
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Native Indian
- ☐ Multiracial

25. Please provide any further comments related to the survey in the space provided below

Once again, thank you for taking your time to complete this survey.