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Voicing Complaints in the Public Arena

Leo W. Jeffres, Guowei Jian, and David Atkin

This study draws on several literatures—the Tichenor et al. (1980) pluralism model stressing community constraints, the spiral of silence literature stressing the importance of the climate of communication, and the currently popular emphasis on democratic discussion in the —public sphere.” In the Tichenor et al. (1980) model, media stress consensus and avoid conflict in more homogeneous communities. Here we extend the issue to question whether community characteristics affect perceptions of the climate of communication and one’s comfort in voicing complaints in public. The results present some support for existing theory as well as some contradictions.

Currently, democratic discussion in the —public sphere” is viewed critically by observers focusing on constraints from the larger social system. Habermas in particular is critical of the quality of democratic discourse, arguing for an —ideal speech situation” where participants are free to question all proposals, introduce ideas and express their attitudes, wishes and needs (Habermas, 1990, pp. 88-89). His work draws on Marxist critiques and focuses on the power exerted by economic interests. Another important literature focusing on social constraints is found in the pluralism perspective, which provides the basis of work by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1980) and others examining community constraints on media performance. Pluralism also focuses on power, in this case the distribution of power within a community. While the pluralistic perspective in mass communication research has focused on how media are constrained by community characteristics, the present study extends this perspective to democratic discussion and the arena of public opinion.

Pluralism, the Spiral of Silence and the Public Sphere

Of the research traditions addressing citizens’ willingness to discuss political issues, the spiral of silence is the most relevant. The classic articulation of the spiral of silence argues that the public context for voicing opinions is important when citizens see their own views as

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declining or ascending in popularity (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1984, 1989). People who see their views in the minority are less likely to voice them to strangers in public settings. One's willingness to speak out is at the center of the spiral of silence (Scherer, 1991), and the conformity hypothesis and theory in general depends on conditions under which people are willing to speak out about controversial issues. The theory says that perceived climate affects one's willingness to speak out in public. We would expect that people's perceptions that the climate of communication is hospitable would be more comfortable in expressing their views since they would be less likely to fear negative feedback.

Although the 2008 presidential election saw an increased level of civic discussion and involvement by younger citizens in particular, trends over the years have been downward. Mindich (2004) notes that younger audiences increasingly have "tuned out" of public affairs and he documents sobering trends suggesting that only 16% of the electorate below age 30 voted in 2004, as declining levels of political knowledge and involvement paralleled declines in their patronage of newspapers, which plummeted from 74% to 28% between 1972 and 2004. Mindich counters arguments about a Web-based renaissance with data suggesting that only 11% of young users see news as a major reason for logging on, even as the average CNN viewer surpasses 60 years of age.

Certainly, individual differences are important factors in determining one's inclination to speak out in public to engage one's neighbors and others in discussions of public problems. One variable prominent in the political literature is political efficacy, a measure of one's personal confidence. Prefacing more than a dozen scales of political alienation and efficacy, Reef and Knoke (1999) define political efficacy as "an individual's sense of personal competence in influencing the political system" (p. 414). Political efficacy long has been associated with important behaviors in a democracy (Reykowski, 1998). In the United States and elsewhere, political efficacy has been linked to voting and political activity (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998; Wollman & Stouder, 1991), citizen participation and mobilization (Finkel, 1987; Yeich & Levine, 1994; Zimmerman, 1989), and greater involvement in political processes (Joslyn & Cigler, 2001; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Teixeira 1992); political involvement, like the concept political participation, refers to actions and attempts to influence. Political engagement often includes more than actions, including political interest, political efficacy, political information, partisanship, and concern about political issues (Brady, 1999).

Efficacy has long been used to predict involvement on the premise that people who feel powerless are less likely to make an effort in the political arena. Shah and his colleagues (2001) found strong reciprocal

relationships between interpersonal trust (measured using items asking whether respondents felt people are honest and similar items for level of trust in government and business institutions) and civic engagement (operationalized as attending club meetings, doing volunteer work, and participating in community projects).

Trust also has been linked to involvement in organizations, e.g., Wollebaek and Selle (2002) found social trust related to membership in multiple associations. This is the link to Putnam's (1995) research, where "bowling alone" is a metaphor for a declining organizational involvement seen as part of a wider civic malaise in which declining involvement in organizations is wrought by media fragmentation, social and generational factors encouraging individualism. Participation in community organizations has been linked to political and personal efficacy (Dougherty, 1988), as well as to communication; Willnat (1995) found political efficacy related to political outspokenness, and Tan (1981) found that political participation and political efficacy predicted media use for Caucasians.

Groups and organizations in a community are seen as a source of power in the pluralistic tradition followed by Tichenor and his colleagues (1980). In general, pluralism says that the distribution of power within a community affects how media operate, and researchers often have operationalized the distribution of power to mean size of population and measures that include the number of groups in a community. In the model, media stress consensus and avoid conflict in more homogeneous communities, where power is more centralized. Here we extend the issue to question whether community characteristics affect perceptions of the climate of communication and one's comfort in voicing complaints in public.

We also address the issue at the community level by focusing on the climate for voicing disagreements, not to strangers, but to neighbors and others in the community where people live. In the spiral of silence, Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1984) referred to the climate for expressing opinion at a national level but measured people's expression in a specific context, "on a train." Others have used waiting rooms and similar public settings for expressing views but speaking about a climate in a more macro sense. Researchers largely have focused on the perceived accuracy of the climate by asking people to estimate the percentage agreeing with particular opinions. Hays (2007) recently noted that the context or climate operationalized in some studies ignores the "communication context," where specific interpersonal rules apply in certain types of conversations. The concept of climate is also prominent in the organizational literature, where employees are believed capable of recognizing the normative patterns of affect and communication. Our

examination includes specific expression of disagreements to neighbors or public officials, which seems more in keeping with the original thought behind the spiral of silence, and a somewhat more general item that also focuses on expressing disagreement in the community.

The more diverse the community, the greater the diversity of expressions and the more likely one will encounter someone with whom one disagrees. Thus, diversity and the climate for expressing opinions are linked. Communities of all sizes are showing increasing diversity as immigration patterns and the need for jobs draws Hispanics and others to small towns; at the same time, more homogeneous ethnic neighborhoods populated by Asians have emerged in Los Angeles and other large American cities. Thus, we cannot take for granted that the neighborhood in which one lives is diverse or homogeneous based on size or context, as pluralism would suggest. And it is in the local context where grassroots democracy and civic discourse need to be studied rather than at some abstract national level.

People's involvement in community groups and organizations can enhance political engagement but also provide opportunities to engage in interpersonal discussions with others and exert personal influence. Thus, in addition to looking at group involvement, we need to examine existing communication patterns. Some people's communication networks are very dense, and some are restricted to one mode or another, e.g., all interpersonal or only community media; the existing communication network also provides us with a measure of people's experience and can influence their perception of the local climate for communication about civic issues. Thus, since we are focusing on the community level, we need to examine the strength of one's involvement in the community communication network—interpersonal and through the community newspaper—which would affect one's comfort with voicing complaints in the public arena. We know from the political communication literature that one's political network affects perceptions and behavior, and studies focusing on public opinions about public issues often measure people's political discussion networks (e.g., Scheufele, Nisbet, & Brossard, 2003). Those who discuss politics frequently in volunteer groups are more politically active (Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004) and less likely to be affected by media content (Erbring et al., 1980); furthermore, the heterogeneity of one's network can affect political activity (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002).

Others following the pluralistic perspective have identified ethnicity as a base of power in a community (e.g., Jeffres et al., 2000, 2002). We know from the public opinion literature that public issues and the communication generating them are significantly impacted by ethnic

factors. Gender, sexual orientation and life cycle factors (e.g., generation gaps) also can affect the climate for discussion in the “public sphere.” During the O.J. Simpson trial, for example, public discussion often sidestepped racial issues (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1999). People living in more diverse, pluralistic, communities would face a different climate than those in more homogeneous communities, with consequences that could be similar to those predicted by the Tichenor et al. (1980) model.

In summary, we have two sets of influences on people’s comfort in voicing complaints in the public arena. First are community characteristics that are the foundations for exercising power. In traditional pluralism studies, this would focus on population size and the number of groups in a community, but here we include economic factors (e.g., income level), life cycle factors (e.g., age or generational factors), and ascriptive factors (e.g., ethnicity); as “community constraints.” Second are the factors that link citizens to their community; these include sense of efficacy, involvement in organizations, involvement in the community communication system, and perceptions of the communication climate in the community.

Bringing these two sets of variables together, we will look at how the objective measures of community diversity affect people’s perceptions of the climate for voicing complaints in the public arena, and in turn how people’s perception of the local climate for communication and their involvement in that communication system would affect their comfort in voicing complaints in the public sphere.

We thus pose the following hypotheses:

H1: One’s sense of efficacy will be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public.

H2: One’s involvement in organizations will be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public.

H3: One’s involvement in the community media/communication system will be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public.

H4: One’s perceptions of the media/communication climate in the community will be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public.

We also pose the following research questions:

RQ1: Do community characteristics that operationalize bases of power affect citizens' comfort in expressing their opinions in public?

RQ2: Do community characteristics that operationalize bases of power affect the relationship between individual-level predictors of citizens' comfort in expressing their opinions in public?

Methods

A sample of residents from different communities in a metropolitan area of the Midwest was matched with community characteristics corresponding to the zipcodes of residents (population, median age, percent Caucasian, percent African-American, percent Hispanic, average household size, percent home owners, percent college grads, percent foreign born, percent speaking second language, median household income, per capita household income, median home value); all of the measures were standardized for the analyses. These tap the factors used by Tichenor et al. (1980) in their studies as well as more recent additions of ascriptive factors such as ethnicity (e.g., Jeffres et al., 2000, 2002).

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2005 using a CATI (computer aided telephone interviewing) system in a major Midwestern city. Some 300 residents were contacted and 144 respondents interviewed, generating a response rate of 48%, including a diverse sample in terms of social locators. The phone numbers of respondents were generated randomly so both listed and unlisted households could be included. The sample was 40.3% male and 59.7% female. Some 48% of respondents were married, 9.8% divorced, 13.5% widowed, 1.5% separated and 27.1% who had never been married. Thirty one percent were renters and 69% home owners. Household income was distributed as follows: 31% reported \$30,000 or less; 20.5% indicated \$30,001-\$50,000; 19.7% earned \$50,001-\$75,000; 16.2% reported \$75,001 or greater; 12.7% reflected missing data. The racial breakdown was: 10.9% African-American, 75.2% Caucasian, 3.6% Hispanic; 2.2% Asian, 1.5% American Indian, 4.4% mixed, and 2.2% other. The distribution of age was: 6.3% 18-20; 16.9% 21-30; 12% 31-40; 19% 41-50; 18.3% 51-60; 12.7% 61-70; 14.8% 71 or older. The distribution for education level achieved was: 5.3% reported some high school or less; 22.5% were high school graduates; 28.9% had attended some college; 28.9% were college graduates; and 13.4% had completed some postgraduate work.

Individual-level variables were operationalized as follows:

Comfort in expressing opinions in public. The criterion variable in this study was resident's comfort in voicing complaints at public meetings. Respondents were asked to use a scale from 0 (*completely*

disagree) to 10 (*completely agree*), where 5 was *neutral*, to indicate how much they agreed with the following statement: —“I feel comfortable voicing a complaint at a public meeting in my community” (Mean = 6.43; standard deviation=3.01).

Sense of efficacy. Efficacy was measured with a set of seven items based on Olsen’s (1969) political incapability scale modified for the community level. Respondents were asked to use a 0-10 scale, where 0 meant *completely disagree*, 5 was *neutral* and 10 meant *completely agree*, to indicate how much they agreed with the following statements: —“Public officials don’t care much what people like me think”; —“Other than voting, people like me have little influence over local government actions”; —“People like me don’t have any say about what the government does”; —“Consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics”; —“Feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country”; —“Feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people”; —“Think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.” Responses were standardized and summed for a scale ($\alpha = .70$).

Involvement in organizations. We asked respondents the following question: —“Do you belong to any neighborhood or community organizations, including block clubs, social groups, religious groups, business groups or ethnic groups?: If they said yes, they were asked, —“What are they?” Then the number was recorded and residents were asked how frequently they attended meetings of such groups (65% never, 19% once or a couple times a year, 6% every couple months, and less than 10% monthly or more often). Responses to both items were standardized and summed for an index of organizational involvement (the two items are correlated; $r=.40$, $p<.001$).

Involvement in the community communication system. We examined people’s involvement in their community communication system where complaints would be expressed using five items that tapped communication with neighbors in general (three measures), learning of community problems from other people, and learning about activities and problems from the community newspaper; items were standardized for a scale ($\alpha = .72$). In particular, respondents used the same 0-10 scale to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements, with 0 meaning *completely disagree*, 5 was *neutral*, and 10 meant *completely agree*: —“I often talk with neighbors on the street or while I’m in my yard”; —“I spend more time talking with my neighbors than most people do”; —“Outside my house or walking down the street, I often greet people passing by even if they are not neighbors that I recognize”; —“I often hear about community problems by word-of-mouth

in my neighborhood”; —learn about community activities and problems from the community newspaper.”

Perceived communication climate in the community. Two items captured people’s perceptions of the climate for communication in their community. Respondents were asked how much they agreed with these statements using a 0-10 point scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*: 1) No one seems shy about disagreeing with neighbors or public officials in my community; 2) People in this community seem to be afraid to speak up when they disagree. The two items were used as independent indicators of the concept because they tap different aspects of people’s perceptions of the climate for communication in their community.

Community-level variables matched to zipcodes of respondents included the measures listed below.

Population. In the Tichenor et al. (1980) research, population is expected to be correlated with the dispersal of power as the number of groups grows. The 2000 census data were recorded.

Life Cycle. Median age and mean household size were matched to zipcodes.

Ethnicity. Several measures of ascriptive variables were recorded, including: the percentage Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic; percentage foreign born; percentage speaking languages other than English at home.

Status. Social status measures recorded were: median household income, per capita income, median home value, percentage home owners, and the percentage of respondents with bachelor’s degrees.

Results

Four hypotheses focused on relationships between our criterion variable and individual-level variables that link people to their communities. The first hypothesis predicted that one’s sense of efficacy would be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public. This hypothesis is supported, with a correlation of .34 ($p < .001$). The second hypothesis predicted that one’s involvement in organizations would be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public and this, too, is supported by the data ($r = .23$, $p < .01$). A correlation of .43 ($p < .001$) between the criterion variable and one’s involvement in the community communication system provides support for the third hypothesis. The fourth hypothesis predicted that one’s perceptions of the communication climate in the community would be positively related to citizens’ comfort in expressing their opinions in public. The two measures of perceived communication

climate are not correlated with comfort in voicing complaints at public meetings; thus, this hypothesis is not supported.

The first research question asked whether community characteristics that operationalize bases of power affect citizens' comfort in expressing their opinions in public. First, bivariate correlations were computed, but none were statistically significant. Next, hierarchical regression was conducted using the community-level variables to predict the criterion variable. Community characteristics as a block failed to explain a statistically-significant amount of variance in the criterion variable (comfort in voicing complaint at public meeting) ($R^2 = .111$, $F_{Ch} = 1.15$ n.s.) but standardized betas for two variables were statistically significant (percent Caucasian $\beta = -.38$, $t = -2.04$, $p < .05$; percent foreign born $\beta = -.53$, $t = -2.16$, $p < .04$) and one approached significance (median age $\beta = .29$, $t = 1.72$, $p < .09$). Thus, those who live in communities with larger percentages of Caucasian and foreign-born residents are less comfortable in voicing complaints at public meetings. Those in communities with an older population on the average are more likely to feel comfortable.

The second research question asked whether community characteristics affected the relationship between individual-level predictors of citizen comfort in expressing opinions in public. A hierarchical regression was conducted; the census data representing community characteristics were entered as the first block, followed by the personal characteristics—the scale representing involvement in community groups, the sense of efficacy scale, the scale measuring involvement in the community/neighborhood communication system, and the two items tapping perception of the communication climate in the community. As Table 1 shows, three of the individual-level predictors continue to be significant predictors with the community characteristics already in the equation—sense of efficacy, involvement in the community communication network, and a perception of the communication climate (that people are afraid to speak when they disagree). We note that organizational involvement, correlated in a bivariate relationship, drops out as a predictor. This suggests that the contribution of organizational involvement is significant for the opportunity it provides for communication. We also see that the climate perception that was not correlated with our criterion variable emerges as a predictor once the community characteristics are in the equation; thus, perceptions of the communication climate are closely associated with the composition of the community. Inspecting bivariate correlations between the climate perceptions and community characteristics, we find

Table 1. *Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Comfort in Voicing Complaints at Public Meetings*

	Standardized Beta	P<
Regression 1		
Community Characteristics		
Population	-.045	
Median age	.26	
Percent Caucasian	-.40	p<.04
Percent African American	-.16	
Percept Hispanic	-.18	
Average household size	-.20	
Percent home owners	-.30	
Percent with BA degrees	-.25	
Percent foreign born	-.53	p<.04
Percent speak other languages	.43	
Median household income	.32	
Per capita income	-.10	
Median home value	.31	
R=.34, R ² Change=.116, F Change=1.1 n.s.		
Individual-level Predictors		
Organizational involvement scale	.33	p<.001
Involvement in community communication network	.36	p<.001
Climate: People in comm. afraid to speak up when disagree	.16	p<.058
Climate: No one seems shy about disagreeing with neighbors/public officials	-.01	
R=.62, R ² Change=.262, F Change=8.7 p<.001		
R=.62, R ² =.379, F=3.5 p<.001		
Regression 2		
Community Characteristics		
Individual Social Categories		
Age	.10	
Gender	.08	
Formal education level	.24	p<.02
Household income	.00	
Own home	.06	
Caucasian ethnicity	-.18	
R=.44, R ² Change=.076, F Change=1.5 n.s.		
Individual-level Predictors		
Organizational involvement scale	.04	
Involvement in community communication network	.36	p<.001
Climate: People in comm. afraid to speak up when disagree	.19	p<.04
Climate: No one seems shy about disagreeing with neighbors/public officials	.03	
R=.65, R ² Change=.23, F Change=7.5 p<.001		
R=.65, R ² =.42, F=2.9, p<.001		

Note: In Regression 1, the community characteristics were standardized and entered as a block; then the individual-level variables were entered. In Regression 2, the community characteristics were entered in the first block, the individual social categories in the second block, and the other individual level predictors in the third block. Statistically significant standardized betas are noted.

that those who live in communities with larger populations ($r = .15$, $p < .05$) and with more African Americans ($r = .21$, $p < .001$) are more likely to say residents are not shy about disagreeing with neighbors or public officials. Also, those who live in communities with an average older population ($r = -.19$, $p < .02$) and more home owners ($r = .12$, $p < .08$) are more likely to disagree with the statement that people in the community are afraid to speak up when they disagree.

A second hierarchical regression included personal characteristics that match the community demographics in part. These were entered as a second block after the census measures of community characteristics. We see that education is the only individual characteristic that is a significant predictor in this second block, and it has no impact on the status of the other individual level predictors. However, the individual characteristics do overwhelm the importance of community-level variables in the final equation. We find that being Caucasian replaces the community measure as a negative predictor of comfort in voicing complaints at public meetings, and percent foreign born drops out. It is interesting that the introduction of education and other social categories does not alter the significance of organizational involvement.

Discussion

The results present some support for existing theory as well as some contradictions. Extending pluralism theory (e.g., Tichenor et al., 1980) to the interpersonal context, we asked if residents of more diverse communities would be more comfortable in expressing complaints at public meetings. The answer is mixed. The larger the percentage of Caucasians—a measure of homogeneity, the less comfortable respondents were in issuing complaints. That said, similar discomfort levels were found for respondents in communities with higher percentages of foreign-born individuals—a measure of diversity. However, when we introduce the individual-level variables, both influences drop out. Since this study was done in a single metropolitan area, we are unable to determine whether macro-level influences would occur in a national sample with regional differences and a wider range of community populations.

Clearly, efficacy is strongly related to being comfortable in such a public role, as is one's involvement in the community communication system, and neither is constrained by the community system-level characteristics or education. However, level of organizational involvement drops out, suggesting that the significance of joining groups is found—to some degree—in the opportunity for communication.

How people perceive the climate for communication does appear to be important, but not as one might expect. Those who see others as reluctant to speak up are more likely to feel comfortable doing so themselves, perhaps stepping into the role they see others vacating. If the spiral of silence were operating as originally formulated, people who see an inhospitable climate would fear negative sanctions and refrain from expressing opinions. Here we find the opposite, a result consistent with Neuwirth and Frederick's (2004) study, where one's own attitudes and sense of self-efficacy were the important influences on willingness to communicate.

With regard to channel influences, the present results reveal a positive impact of communication network variables on willingness to complain in public. This finding parallels those of the knowledge gap literature, where journalistic outlets appearing in a range of communication channels have been shown to cultivate a more informed citizenry (e.g., Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Thus, the ongoing proliferation of communication channels may not be contributing to the general public affairs malaise about which commentators (e.g., Mindich, 2004; Putnam, 1995) have expressed concern.

Although scholarly discussions of organizational involvement of this sort might sound abstract to some, such work is critical to enhancing our understanding of the larger democracy, which is contingent upon an electorate that's well-informed, involved, and engaged in civic discourse. Putnam (1995) sees civic engagement emerging from such civic organizations, which he terms "fabrics of trust" (p. 65). We need to explore the extent to which new media—particularly Internet applications—serve to catalyze, inhibit, or transform public discussion and civic involvement. Increasingly, younger citizens are interacting online, where more anonymous chatrooms offer the chance to interact with similar others or diverse groups that are the target of one's persuasion. Speaking out online is quite different from speaking out in public settings, and we need research which not only studies contextual differences (online vs. in-person) but also the influence of traits—some people are likely to be "shy" or "uninhibited" regardless of context. Where does state end and trait begin?

Limitations

The present study's results are limited by the small scope of our survey, which was done in a single metropolitan area. System-level characteristics were measured by zipcodes, which reflect the more immediate community. The "size" of the community to which respondents were applying their answers in this survey (and others) is

indiscernible in a metropolitan context without additional measures that sort out levels of scale. Pluralism, as Tichenor et al. (1980) conceptualize it, likely differs for neighborhoods vs. metro areas. One may live in a diverse metropolitan area but live and work through organizations in a more homogeneous suburb or neighborhood.

This study also included only two measures of the "communication climate" and one measure of "comfort in expressing opinions in public." As the spiral of silence literature demonstrates, the concept of the "climate" (whether opinion or communication) is problematic and deserves more attention. Experimental studies often "fix" the context operationalizing climate while larger, national surveys finesse the issue by asking respondents to predict the nature of public opinion. The climate may differ for one's neighborhood, one's ethnic group, one's social class, and the larger community. These are not sorted out in this, or other studies. And clearly there are differences in the nature of the public context, such that many people would speak out at a block club meeting or gathering of one's social club but not during the public question and answer period of a city council meeting. One may be comfortable speaking out in smaller public contexts but not larger ones. One may be comfortable speaking out in more informal contexts but not in formal meetings, e.g., local forums but not public council meetings. And certainly the length of one's history with a context is important; a person may feel quite comfortable objecting at a group meeting one has attended for many years but not at a meeting where the history is more limited. Reluctance to speak out at one level might differ from that felt at another level. Work is needed to define the concept of "community" more precisely in studies of the climate of communication, the spiral of silence and the "public sphere."

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