

Social Media and the ‘Spiral of Silence’

BY KEITH HAMPTON, LEE RAINIE, WEIXU LU, MARIA DWYER, INYOUNG SHIN AND KRISTEN PURCELL

Summary of Findings

A major insight into human behavior from pre-internet era studies of communication is the tendency of people not to speak up about policy issues in public—or among their family, friends, and work colleagues—when they believe their own point of view is not widely shared. This tendency is called the “spiral of silence.”¹

Some social media creators and supporters have hoped that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter might produce different enough discussion venues that those with minority views might feel freer to express their opinions, thus broadening public discourse and adding new perspectives to everyday discussion of political issues.

We set out to study this by conducting a survey of 1,801 adults.² It focused on one important public issue: Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations of widespread government surveillance of Americans’ phone and email records. We selected this issue because other surveys by the Pew Research Center at the time we were fielding this poll showed that **Americans were divided** over whether the NSA contractor’s leaks about surveillance were justified and whether the **surveillance policy itself was a good or bad idea**. For instance, Pew Research found in one survey that 44% say the release of classified information harms the public interest while 49% said it serves the public interest.

The survey reported in this report sought people’s opinions about the Snowden leaks, their willingness to talk about the revelations in various in-person and online settings, and their perceptions of the views of those around them in a variety of online and off-line contexts.

This survey’s findings produced several major insights:

- **People were less willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in social media than they were in person.** 🐦 86% of Americans were willing to have an in-person conversation about the surveillance program, but just 42% of Facebook and Twitter users were willing to post about it on those platforms.
- **Social media did not provide an alternative discussion platform for those who were not willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story.** 🐦 Of the 14% of Americans unwilling to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in person with others, only 0.3% were willing to post about it on social media.
- **In both personal settings and online settings, people were more willing to share their views if they thought their audience agreed with them.** 🐦 For instance, at work, those who felt their coworkers agreed with their opinion were about three times more likely to say they would join a workplace conversation about the Snowden-NSA situation.
- **Previous ‘spiral of silence’ findings as to people’s willingness to speak up in various settings also apply to social media users.** Those who use Facebook were more willing to share their views if they thought their followers agreed with them. If a person felt that people in their Facebook network agreed with their opinion about the Snowden-NSA issue, they were about twice as likely to discuss the issue on Facebook about this issue. 🐦

to join a discussion on Facebook about this issue. 🗨️

- Facebook and Twitter users were also less likely to share their opinions in many face-to-face settings. 🗨️ This was especially true if they did not feel that their Facebook friends or Twitter followers agreed with their point of view. For instance, the average Facebook user (someone who uses the site a few times per day) was half as likely as other people to say they would be willing to voice their opinion with friends at a restaurant. If they felt that their online Facebook network agreed with their views on this issue, their willingness to speak out in a face-to-face discussion with friends was higher, although they were still only 0.74 times as likely to voice their opinion as other people.

Overall, the findings indicate that in the Snowden case, social media did not provide new forums for those who might otherwise remain silent to express their opinions and debate issues. Further, if people thought their friends and followers in social media disagreed with them, they were less likely to say they would state their views on the Snowden-NSA story online and in other contexts, such as gatherings of friends, neighbors, or co-workers. This suggests a spiral of silence might spill over from online contexts to in-person contexts, though our data cannot definitively demonstrate this causation. It also might mean that the broad awareness social media users have of their networks might make them more hesitant to speak up because they are especially tuned into the opinions of those around them.

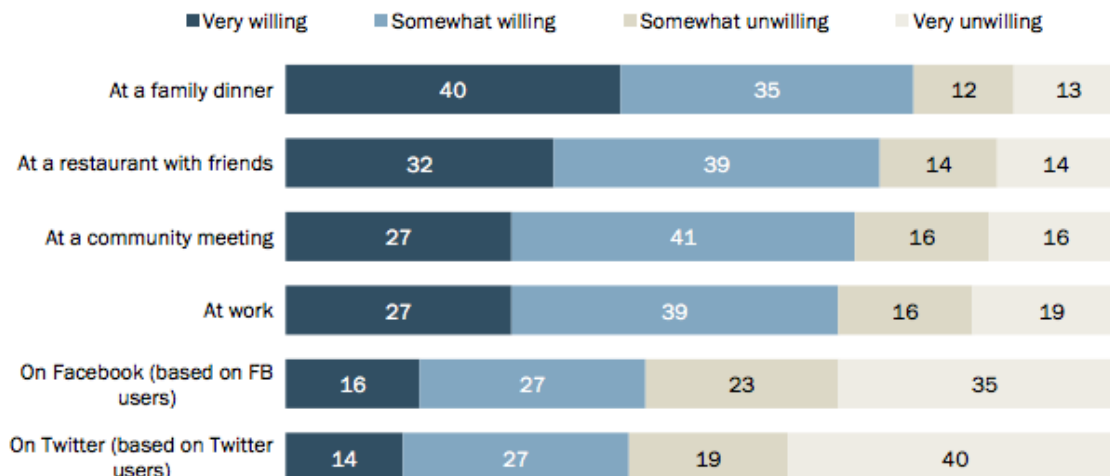
A rundown of the key survey findings:

People reported being less willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in social media than they were in person—and social media did not provide an alternative outlet for those reluctant to discuss the issues in person.

Fully 86% of Americans reported in the Pew Research survey they were “very” or “somewhat” willing to have a conversation about the government’s surveillance program in at least one of the physical settings we queried 🗨️ —at a public meeting, at a family dinner, at a restaurant with friends, or at work. Yet, only 42% of those who use Facebook or Twitter were willing to discuss these same issues through social media.

If the topic of the government surveillance programs came up in these settings, how willing would you be to join in the conversation?

% of population





Of the 14% of Americans who were not willing to discuss this issue in person, almost none (0.3%) said they were willing to have a conversation about this issue through social media. This challenges the notion that social media spaces might be considered useful venues for people sharing views they would not otherwise express when they are in the physical presence of others.

Not only were social media sites not an alternative forum for discussion, social media users were less willing to share their opinions in face-to-face settings.

We also did statistical modeling allowing us to more fully understand the findings by controlling for such things as gender, age, education levels, race, and marital status—all of which are related to whether people use social media and how they use it. That modeling allowed us to calculate how likely people were to be willing to express their views in these differing settings holding other things constant.³

The results of our analyses show that, even holding other factors such as age constant, social media users are less likely than others to say they would join a discussion about the Snowden-NSA revelations.

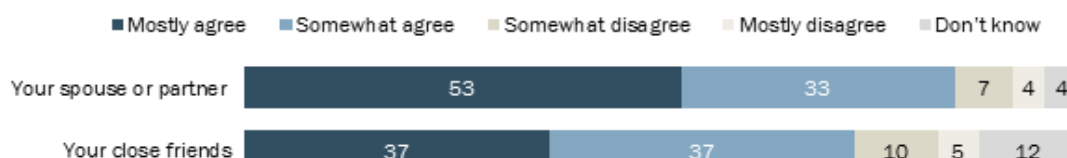
- The typical Facebook user—someone who logs onto the site a few times per day—is half as likely to be willing to have a discussion about the Snowden-NSA issues at a physical public meeting as a non-Facebook user. 
- Similarly, the typical Twitter user—someone who uses the site a few times per day—is 0.24 times less likely to be willing to share their opinions in the workplace as an internet user who does not use Twitter. 

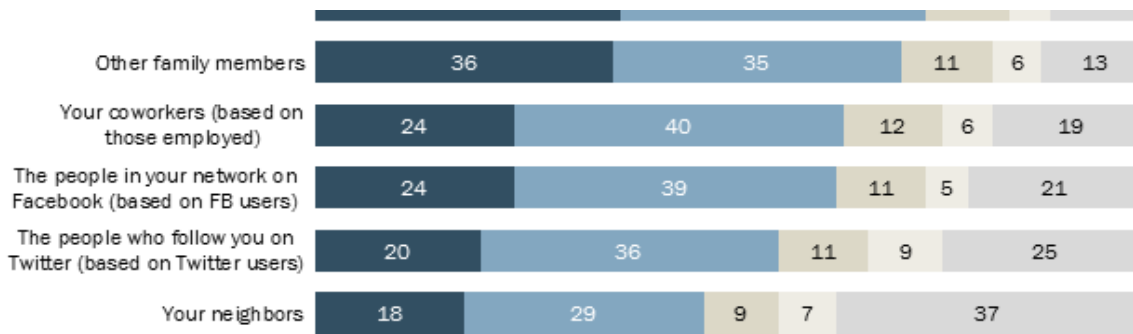
In both offline and online settings, people said they were more willing to share their views on the Snowden-NSA revelations if they thought their audience agreed with them.

Previous research has shown that when people decide whether to speak out about an issue, they rely on reference groups—friendships and community ties—to weigh their opinion relative to their peers. In the survey, we asked respondents about their sense of whether different groups of people in their lives agreed or disagreed with their positions on the Snowden leaks. There was some notable variance between those who feel they know the views of their peers and those who do not know what others think. Generally, the more socially close people were—e.g. spouses or family members—the more likely it was that the respondents felt their views matched.

To what extent do you think others agree with your views about the Snowden-NSA revelations?

% of population who say various people agree or disagree with their views





Source, Pew Research Center Internet Project Survey August 7-September 16, 2013. N=1,801 adults
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

We again calculated how likely it was that someone would be willing to share their views in different settings, depending on their sense of whether their audience agreed with them. We found that, in the case of Snowden's revelations about the NSA, it was clear that if people felt their audience supported them, they were more likely to say they would join a conversation:🐦

- At work, those who felt their coworkers agreed with their opinion on the government's surveillance program were 2.92 times more likely to say they would join a conversation on the topic of Snowden-NSA.🐦
- At a family dinner, those who felt that family members agreed with their opinion were 1.90 times more likely to be willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA issue.
- At a restaurant with friends, if their close friends agreed with their opinion people were 1.42 times more likely to be willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA matter.
- On Facebook, if a person felt that people in their Facebook network agreed with their position on that issue, they were 1.91 times more likely to be willing to join a conversation on the topic of Snowden-NSA.

Those who do not feel that their Facebook friends or Twitter followers agree with their opinion are more likely to self-censor their views on the Snowden-NSA story in many circumstances—in social media and in face-to-face encounters.


In this survey on the Snowden-NSA matter, we found that when social media users felt their opinions were not supported online, they were less likely to say they would speak their minds 🐦. This was true not only in social media spaces, but also in the physical presence of others.

- The average Facebook user (someone who uses the site a few times per day) was half as likely as other people to say they would be willing to voice their opinion with friends at a restaurant. If they felt that their online Facebook network agreed with their views on this issue, their willingness to speak out in a face-to-face discussion with friends was higher, although they were still only 0.74 times as likely to voice their opinion.
- The typical Twitter user (who uses the site a few times per day) is 0.24 times as likely to share their opinions with colleagues at work as an internet user who does not use Twitter. However, Twitter users who felt that their online Twitter followers shared their opinion were less reserved: They were only 0.66 times less likely to speak up than other internet users.

The survey did not directly explore why people might remain silent if they felt that their opinions were in the minority. The traditional view of the spiral of silence is that people choose not to speak out for fear of isolation. Other Pew Research studies have found that it is common for social media users to be mistaken about their friends' beliefs and **to be surprised once they discover their friends' actual views via social media**. Thus, it might be the case that people do not want to disclose their minority views for fear of disappointing their friends, getting into fruitless arguments, or losing them entirely. Some people may prefer not to share their views on social media because their posts persist and can be found later—perhaps by prospective employers or others with high status. As to why the absence of agreement on social media platforms spills over into a spiral of silence in physical settings, we speculate that social media users may have witnessed those with minority opinions experiencing ostracism, ridicule or bullying online, and that this might increase the perceived risk of opinion sharing in other settings.




People also say they would speak up, or stay silent, under specific conditions.

In addition to exploring the impact of agreement/disagreement on whether people were willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA revelations, we asked about other factors that might shape whether people would speak out, even if they suspected they held minority views. This survey shows how the social and political climate in which people share opinions depends on several other things:

- **Their confidence in how much they know.** Those who felt they knew a lot about the issues were more likely than others to say they would join conversations.
- **The intensity of their opinions.** Those who said they had strong feelings about the Snowden-NSA matter were more willing than those with less intense feelings to talk about the subject.
- **Their level of interest.** Those who said they were very interested in the Snowden-NSA story were more likely than those who were not as interested to express their opinions. 

People's use of social media did little to increase their access to information about the Snowden-NSA revelations.

We asked respondents where they were getting information about the debates swirling around the Snowden revelations, and found that social media was not a common source of news for most Americans. Traditional broadcast news sources were by far the most common sources. In contrast, social media sources like Facebook and Twitter were the least commonly identified sources for news on this issue.

- 58% of all adults got at least some information on the topic of Snowden-NSA from TV or radio. 
- 34% got at least some information from online sources other than social media.⁴
- 31% got at least some information from friends and family.
- 19% got at least some information from a print newspaper.
- 15% got at least some information while on Facebook. 
- 3% got at least some information from Twitter. 

There are limits to what this snapshot can tell us about how social media use is related to the ways Americans discuss important political issues. This study focuses on one specific public affairs issue that was of interest to most Americans: the Snowden-NSA revelations. It is not an exhaustive review of all public policy issues and the way they are discussed in social media.

The context of the Snowden-NSA story may also have made it somewhat different from other kinds of public debates. At the time of this study, the material leaked by Edward Snowden related to NSA monitoring of communications dealt specifically with “meta-data” collected on people’s phone and internet communications. For a phone call, the meta-data collected by the NSA was described as including the duration of the call, when it happened, the numbers the call was between, but not a recording of the call. For email, meta-data would have included the sender and recipient’s email addresses and when it was sent, but not the subject or text of the email.

Additional information leaked by Snowden after our study was completed suggests that Western intelligence agencies monitored and manipulated the content of online discussions and the NSA recorded the content of foreign phone calls. In reaction to these additional revelations, people may have adjusted their use of social media and their willingness to discuss a range of topics, including public issues such as government surveillance. However, given the limited extent of the information leaked by Snowden at the time the survey was fielded, it seems unlikely that the average American had extensively altered their willingness to discuss political issues. Future research may provide insight into whether Americans have become more or less willing to discuss specific issues on-and offline as a result of government surveillance programs. While this study focused on the Snowden-NSA revelations, we suspect that Americans use social media in similar ways to discuss and get news about other political issues.

About this Report

An informed citizenry depends on people’s exposure to information on important political issues and on their willingness to discuss these issues with those around them. The rise of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, has introduced new spaces where political discussion and debate can take place. This report explores the degree to which social media affects a long-established human attribute—that those who think they hold minority opinions often self-censor, failing to speak out for fear of ostracism or ridicule. It is called the “spiral of silence.”

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals:⁵

Keith N. Hampton, *Associate Professor, Rutgers University*

Lee Rainie, *Director, Internet Project*

Weixu Lu, *PhD student, Rutgers University*

Maria Dwyer, *PhD student, Rutgers University*

Inyoung Shin, *PhD student, Rutgers University*

Kristen Purcell, *Associate Director for Research, Internet Project*

Other major reports from the Pew Research Center Internet Project on the social and political impact of social networking sites on social and political activity can be found at:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/10/19/social-media-and-political-engagement/>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/09/04/politics-on-social-networking-sites/>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/02/03/why-most-facebook-users-get-more-than-they-give/>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/06/16/social-networking-sites-and-our-lives/>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/11/04/social-isolation-and-new-technology/>

<http://www.pewinternet.org/2004/10/27/the-internet-and-democratic-debate/>

About this survey

This report contains findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,801 American adults (ages 18+) conducted by the Pew Research Center and fielded August 7-September 16, 2013 by Princeton Research Associates International. It was conducted in English and Spanish on landline (N=901) and cell phones (N=900). The margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus 2.6 percentage points. Some 1,076 respondents are users of social networking sites and the margin of error for that subgroup is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points.

-
1. Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). "The Spiral of Silence A Theory of Public Opinion." *Journal of Communication* 24(2): 43-51. ↩
 2. The survey was conducted between August 7-September 16, 2013 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percentage points for the full sample. ↩
 3. We report the odds based on a logistic regression. The outcome of a logistic regression tells us the probability that a person will do something based on the relationship to a series of predictor variables. For example, if half of the people in our sample are willing to speak out at a public meeting, but half are not, the probability of doing something is 50%, i.e., a 50-50 percent chance, the odds are equal, 1 to 1. The odds are a ratio of the probability that a person will do something over the probability that they will not. Let's say, hypothetically, that 80% of the people in our sample were willing to speak with family about an issue, this means that 20% were not. The odds that they would speak out are $.8/.2 = 4$. That is to say, the odds that someone would speak with family are 4 to 1, or are 4 times higher, or are 4 times more likely to occur. Throughout this report, we use that language. ↩
 4. In this survey, 80% of adults said they were internet users, 71% of the internet users are Facebook users, and 18% of internet users are Twitter users. ↩
 5. We are grateful to the following individuals for their comments and advice as we developed this work: Pablo Boczkowski (Northwestern University), William Eveland (The Ohio State University), and Rima Wilkes (University of British Columbia). ↩