

Study: News on social media suffers a 'spiral of silence'

By Chris Ip, Columbia Journalism Review

If social media users think their followers don't share their opinion on the news, they are less likely to post those views on Facebook and Twitter, according to a new Pew Research Center report, released today. It showed Facebook and Twitter users posted less about Edward Snowden and his revelations of government surveillance if they felt their networks would disagree with their viewpoints, and were nearly twice as likely to share on Facebook if they felt their network agreed with them.

The authors connect these findings to the 'spiral of silence,' a phenomenon where people who think they hold a minority opinion don't speak up for fear of social exclusion. "One of the possible theories [for this study] is that when people see diversity in opinion, they don't want to challenge other people, or upset them, or risk losing a friendship," said Keith Hampton of Rutgers University, one of the study's authors, in a telephone interview. For the authors, the study implies that the long-documented suppression of minority opinion exists online just as in real life.

As every social media user becomes an amateur publisher, the Pew study also shows the consequence of depending on individuals to disseminate the news. Indeed, it shows 58 percent of their sample of 1,801 American adults got information about Snowden from TV or the radio while only 15 percent received it from Facebook and 3 percent from Twitter.

Further, the study found that while 86 percent of respondents wanted to discuss the Snowden story in real life, only 42 percent would post about it on social media. Here, the authors

speculate that social networks increase awareness of different points of view, making users more hesitant to express their own.

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