

Spiral of Silence

- A “Mean Girl” approach to keeping the status quo:



Regina George



- The media coverage shapes individual's perception of public sentiment on an issue.
- People do what she says.
 - Society threatens deviant individuals with isolation.
 - You can't sit with us!



Gretchen Wieners

- “My dad invented toaster strudel”: the need to feel accepted.
- Individuals experience fear of isolation continuously.

Karen Smith



- “No, I really am...I’m failing everything.”
- The results of this estimate affect their behavior in public, especially their willingness or not to express opinions openly.

Cady Heron



- This fear of isolation causes individuals to try to assess the climate of opinion at all times.
- Animal world versus girl world.

The Mean Spiral of Silence

- There are two paths:
 - the silent minority conforms to the loud majority,
 - the silent minority becomes the majority.



Where did all this meanness come from?

- The media has had an influence over public opinion for centuries.
- The Federalists, in the 18th century, felt that the strength of beliefs relies on the number who share that belief.
- The Nazis, during World War II, convinced a nation to follow their regime.

Spiral of Silence: History

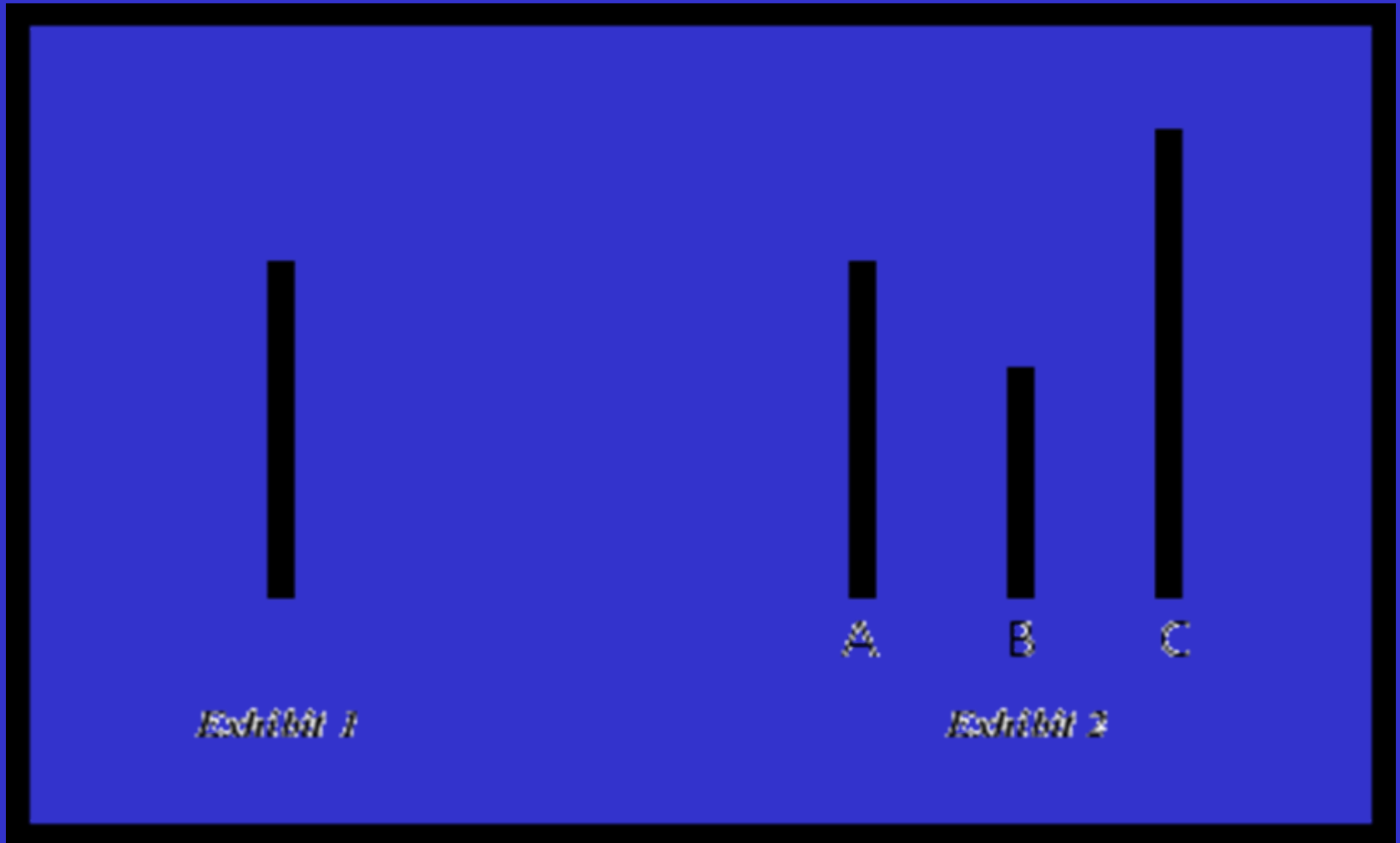
- “If public opinion arises from an interaction of individuals with their social environments, we should find at work the processes which Asch and Milgram have confirmed experimentally. To the individual, not isolating himself is more important than his own judgment”

Noelle-Neumann, 1974

Spiral of Silence: History

- Understanding Theory – A Look Back
 - Social Psychology impact on Media/Communication Theory
 - Asch Experiment (1958)
 - Milgram Experiment (1963)

History: Asch Experiment (1958)



History: Asch Experiment (1958)

- A study of conformity
- Measures how pressure from other people impact perceptions and decision making
- Results:
 - Overall, subjects conformed on 33% of their responses to blatantly wrong answer
 - 75% conformed to majority at least once

History: Asch Experiment (1958)

- "The tendency to conformity in our society is so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black." –Asch
- Why did subjects conform?
 - **Wanted to be liked by group**
 - **Fear of being wrong**
 - **Belief that the group is more informed than the individual**

History: Milgram Experiment (1963)

- Experiment on Obedience and Authority
- Study conducted at Yale University with subjects aged 20–50 years of age
- Supposedly testing the effects of punishment on learning
- “Shock” participant (confederate) if can’t remember word pairs

History: Milgram Experiment

- How many subjects administered maximum shock (450-volts)?
 - 67.5% of participants administered 450-volt shock (3 times)
 - 100% of subjects administered at least 300-volt shock
- When other participants (confederates involved)?
 - 92.5% administered 450-volt shock

Linking Psychology to Media

- Asch and Milgram experiments show that majority opinion has an impact on individual decision making
- Noelle-Neuman (1974): Individuals' perceptions of the climate of public opinion influence what they say and think
- Mass media shapes perception of public opinion through presentation (framing, agenda setting, gatekeeping)
 - **“What does not get reported does not exist”**

Noelle-Neumann

Spiral of Silence: Definition

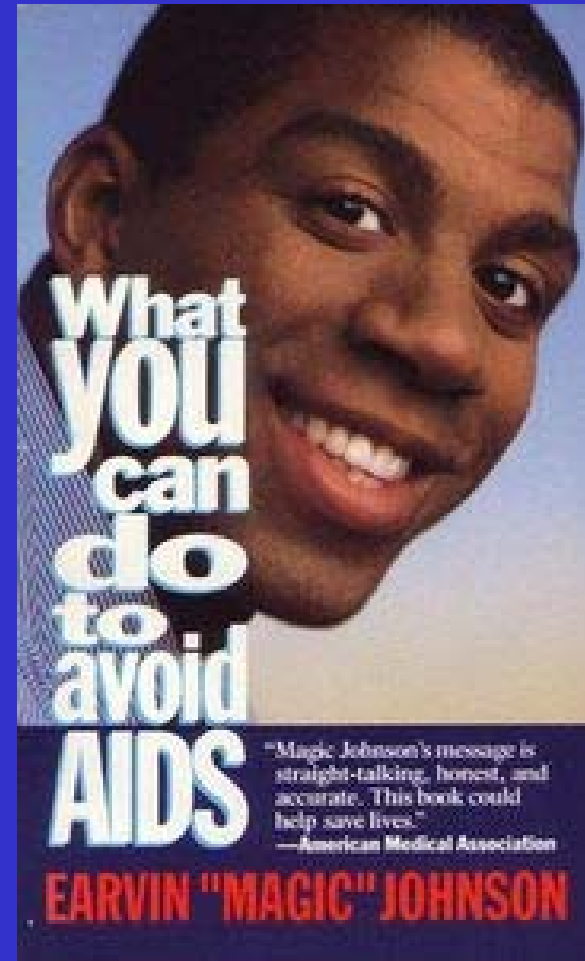
- Theory created by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974)
- Opinions of the majority become the opinions of all
- “Public opinion is the dominant opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behavior in that it threatens the dissenting individual with isolation and the politician with loss of support.”

Over the last 30 years...

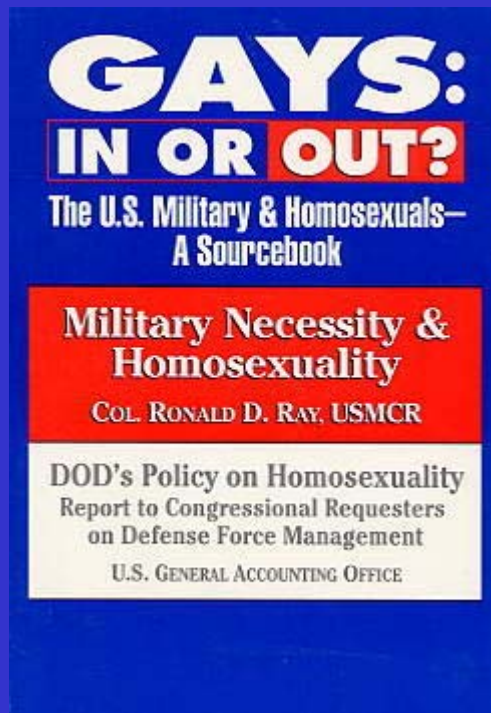
Vietnam



AIDS



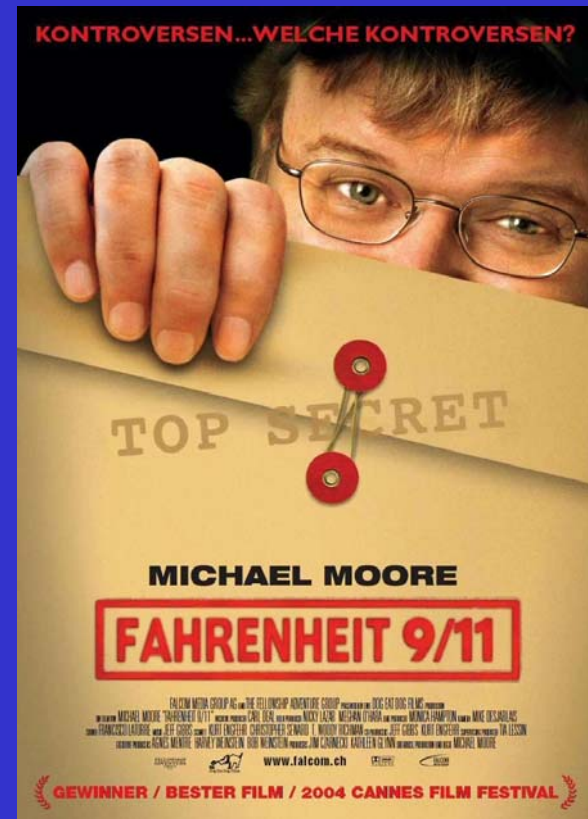
Homosexuals in the Military



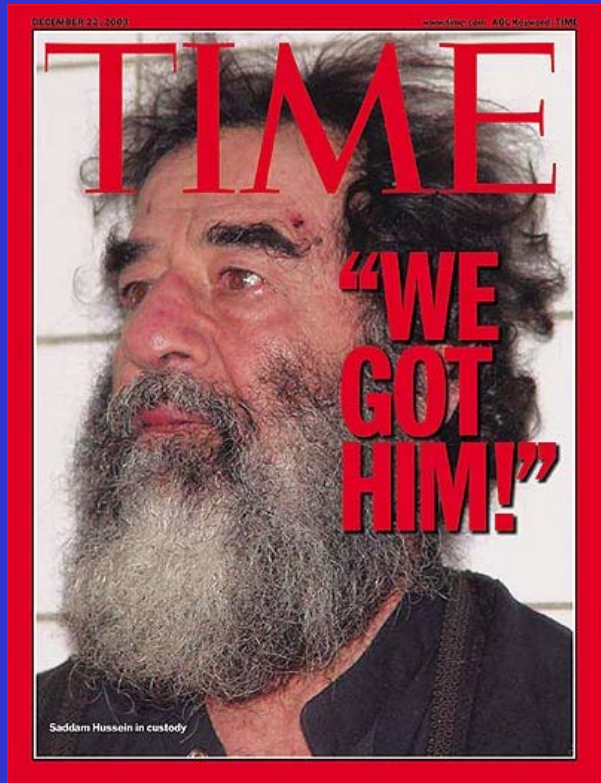
Persian Gulf War



September 11



War in Iraq



In Gainesville?

- Drunk Professor?
- How has the media influenced public opinion on this local issue?
- Should this have been part of the “best week ever”?

Breaking the Spiral

