

PERSONALIEN

Zum 85. Geburtstag von Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann

von Jack M. McLeod, em. Professor an der University of Wisconsin, Madison

As scholars, we should be able to judge the merits of ideas in our field of expertise by examining the empirical evidence for and against these ideas rather than by their closeness of fit to our own political beliefs. We should evaluate the careers of prominent scholars in our field not only by the balance of evidence in the short-run but also by the amount and quality of research their ideas have stimulated in other scholars in the long-run. Even if the research generated has markedly revised the original ideas, the contributions of the originating scholar should be favorably recognized.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann several decades ago introduced the Spiral-of-Silence theory to the field of public opinion that was previously rawly empirical and very largely atheoretical. Concern with theory of public opinion has grown markedly in recent years in both academic and applied research circles. Much of this needed growth can be attributed to the ideas and scholarly energy of Noelle-Neumann. Her emphasis on the social control functions of public opinion and its manipulation has provided a balance to perspectives viewing public opinion solely as an instrument for social change. The »spiral« aspects of her theory require that public opinion be viewed as a dynamic *process* taking place over time – an aspect too often overlooked by scholars.

We should appreciate that Noelle-Neumann's ideas have generated a large amount of research, and particularly in the U.S. and Asia. Much of this research has failed to confirm various aspects of her theory. Some of the disconfirmation reflects inadequate measurement and design, but the evidence strongly suggests that the theory needs to be revised to fit other societies, historical periods, and conditions. It is clear that manipulation of the climate of opinion is at least as common by politicians and media owners as by journalists, for example. But none of this should detract from Noelle-Neumann's scholarly contributions. Grand theories are meant to be challenged – those of Marx and Freud are prime examples – and should be revised or abandoned in the light of research evidence. Noelle-Neumann's ideas have been very successful in generating a flood of research that has illuminated the role of media and interpersonal communication in the process of public opinion.

In examining the career of Noelle-Neumann, it is important to note that her Allensbach Institut was perhaps the first organization to build basic theoretical inquiry into an applied research program. One of the more hopeful signs for public opinion research is that there are closer connections today than ever before between academic scholarship and applied research. This is shown in various ways, including sharing of data archives and discussion of common problems of scholars and practitioners around the world.

We must acknowledge that Noelle-Neumann remains a controversial figure. Her insistence that scholars should be engaged in political affairs guarantees that. The controversy has been fueled by recent efforts to turn the spotlight on her past during the Nazi period. Reviewing the past of public figures is appropriate and important, though we should hope for better historical scholarship that has been presented so far by her detractors and defenders. Whatever historical judgment might be rendered in the future, we should not overlook the important direct and indirect contributions to public opinion theory and research that Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has made in the past half-century.

Berufung von Michaela Krützen an die HFF München

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