

# Coping Strategies of Police-related Cyber Public Sentiment Crisis Based on “Spiral of Silence” Theory

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## ABSTRACT

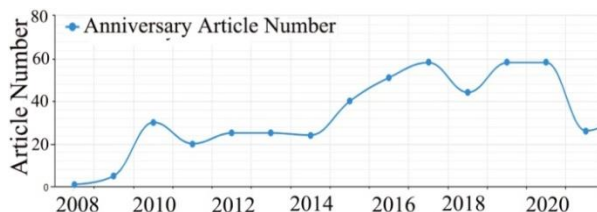
In We-media era, if only a piece of information is appalling and absorbing enough, grassroots may immediately become centre of the cyber world. At the same time, influence of police propaganda departments and traditional media has been greatly weakened. Based on “Spiral of Silence” theory, facing cyber public sentiment crisis, concerned police propaganda departments are to take an active reaction, utter words based on facts without going to extremes or holding emotionality in order to avoid a second public sentiment crisis.

**Keywords:** *Spiral of Silence, Public Sentiment Crisis, Coping Strategies.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Spiral of Silence” theory was first put up by Noelle Neumann, who believed that an individual internet user usually has pressure to comply and he is afraid of being isolated during the course of communicating with other internet users. Subsequently, dominating voices rise like a spiral and opposite voices become lower.<sup>[1]</sup>

Today, “Spiral of Silence” theory can not explain all problems during the course of information communication, however, it offers basic theory support for coping with Police-related cyber public sentiment crisis. Researchers have done much about coping with police-related cyber public sentiment crisis. Through searching, we have found that there are 465 articles concerning Police-related cyber public sentiment crisis (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Anniversary article number concerning police-related cyber public sentiment crisis.

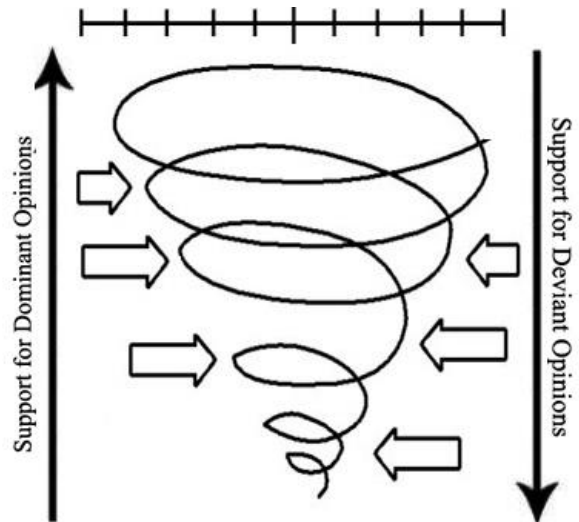
## 2. FEATURES OF POLICE-RELATED CYBER PUBLIC SENTIMENT CRISIS.

In the We-media era, information is communicated in the form of text, picture, audio and video through internet, radio, TV and cell phone.<sup>[2]</sup> Subsequently, police propaganda departments face a more complicated situation and bear higher pressure. First, the spread speed of police-related cyber public sentiment gets higher. In We-media era, internet users can express their viewpoints and communicate information freely. Once police-related hot events occur, internet users will discuss and debate based on Wechat, Weibo, news platforms and video platforms. In the traditional-media era, it takes a period of time for police-related events to be known to the crowd after they happen, which leaves time for police propaganda departments to cope with the possible crowd’s doubt and criticism. However, in the We-media era, information communication is instant, and everyone holds a smart phone, with which he can take photos or videoed the spot and put these materials on the internet. If only a piece of information is absorbing and eye-catching, the person it concerns will become the centre of cyber public sentiment, no matter how humble or ordinary he is, which means influence and authority of police propaganda department and traditional mass media is weakened and impacted. In the traditional-media era, there exist gatemen who can choose, select and revise information that will be released, and eliminate information that may stimulate the crowd’s mood, aggravate the dispute and cyber

public sentiment crisis. In the We-media era, gatemmen can only choose, select and revise information released by their own departments, who have no ability to choose, select or revise information released by We-media, which means gatemmen’s influence and power is greatly weakened. When police-related hot events happen, We-media may express their biased opinions or make a sharp criticism before cyber dominant opinions form. If their biased opinions are not accepted in one news platform, they may sway to other news platforms, until they find internet users who hold the same opinions. Ages, identities, classes of internet users vary, whose opinions about the same event vary, which aggravate cyber antagonism. As a result, cyber public sentiment becomes extreme and sentimental. With the development of urbanization, the majority of young internet users do not have brothers or sisters. He or she is the only child in his family, who has accepted much more care and love, live his or her life in his or her own way, and does not communicate much with others. These young internet users have a strong sense of self-ego and do not care much about others’ sense or feelings. Their mood may become extreme, which leads to a phenomenon that if I do not agree with you, I will blame and scold you violently. Under this background, if an individual policeman behaves inappropriately and causes public sentiment crisis, he will recur much more criticism, blame and abuse than he can bear. In this way, police propaganda departments face stronger pressure than ever before.

**3. ADAPTATION OF THE “SILENCE OF SPIRAL” THEORY TO COPING WITH CYBER POLICE-RELATED PUBLIC SENTIMENT CRISIS.**

During the course of cyber information communication, the individual internet user is afraid of being isolated and offended when expressing his own viewpoint, and gradually he is liable to hold his own deviate viewpoints and listen to other internet users’ viewpoints and opinions first, which is a prerequisite of the “Silence of Spiral” theory. If an individual internet user’s opinion is consistent with other internet users’ opinions, his desire to express his opinions is enlarged, and he will actively make remarks on the internet and expect others to accept and respond to his opinions. If an individual internet user’s opinion is deviant from other internet users’ opinions, his desire to express his opinions is suppressed, and he will keep silent and even give up his own opinions, yielding to other internet users’ pressure and opinions. That is, if an individual user’s opinion is consistent with others’, he will become much more active; if an individual user’s opinion is deviant from others’, he will become much more passive. The “Silence of Spiral” theory is showed in Figure 2.



**Figure 2**Spiral of silence.

In a We-media era, each internet user has his identity in WeChat, Weibo, news platform and videoplatform. Remarks that an internet user made in the past have left history record and trace, by means of which, other internet users can appraise or criticize him. Even if an internet user eliminated his remarks for he realized that his remarks are not appropriate, the screenshot may have been captured and kept as evidence. Eliminating faulty remarks is like plugging one's ears while stealing a bell, as is known to all internet users. Consequently, internet users may become overcautious when they make remarks on the internet for fear of being blamed and even scolded by other internet users. Cyber Human Search is another problem that makes internet users feel great pressure when they make remarks, which means that if a person does something that attracts much cyber attention, he is highlighted and exposed, from his office position to his hobbies and remarks he has made on the internet. In other words, if a person is intentionally searched by other internet users, everything about his life will be exposed. Although this is forbidden from the perspective of legislation, this phenomenon still exists on the internet today. During the course of information communication, cyber opinion leaders’ influence is vital, who can make dominant cyber opinions spread quickly and rise like a spiral. Followers of cyber opinion leaders make dominant opinion’s influence improve. Cyber opinion leaders can be compared to information source, while their followers can be compared to channels like an enlarged net. When deviant cyber opinions appear on the internet, they will blame and scold the reviewer. Some followers may even attack the reviewer personally by means of disclosing his address, relatives, families and co-workers. As a result, deviant-opinion holders are afraid to express their own opinions, since it means standing against dominant-opinion holders and recurring blame. As time goes on, dominant cyber opinions become stronger, while

deviant cyber opinions become weaker. Certainly, the prerequisite of “Silence of Spiral” theory is that dominant cyber opinions are reasonable, logical and lawful. If dominant cyber opinions have obvious flaw or fault, they will eventually recur widespread criticism, no matter how cyber opinion leaders and their followers are mighty or dominant. Therefore, if dominant cyber opinions are reasonable, logical and lawful, they can rise like a spiral. If dominant cyber opinions are not reasonable, logical or lawful, they will finally collapse after reaching a certain height.

**4. ANALYSIS OF “SILENCE OF ANTI-SPIRAL” PHENOMENA.**

“Silence of Anti-Spiral” theory is development and creation of “Silence of Spiral” theory, which believes that deviant opinion supporters do not bear much pressure from dominant opinion supporters, and can express deviant opinions freely, as cyber space is virtual and anonymous, and internet users are equal.<sup>[3]</sup>Most internet users do not know each other. When they express their viewpoints through news platform, video platform, QQ group or Wechat group, they face strangers who live far away from them.<sup>[4]</sup>Realistic barriers such as sense of shame, introversion, and body gestures being eliminated, internet users can communicate with each other as freely as they can. During the course of communication and making remarks, internet users input text messages with keyboards, without tone, voice, or expression. There seems to be thick fog covering all internet users’ shortage and defect. In this way, internet users feel greatly relaxed when they express their viewpoints on the internet.<sup>[5]</sup> Those shy and introvert people who are not good at expressing themselves in the practical world may become brilliant conversationalists. The cyber space is filled with freedom of expression and democracy, and subsequently voice from the disadvantaged group can be heard after police-related events happened. It should be pointed out that the “Silence of Anti-Spiral” theory does not deny the “Silence of Spiral” theory. It is a supplementary explanation of the “Silence of Spiral” theory. Two different theories adapt to different situations and different cyber groups. There does not exist a theory that can explain all cyber phenomena. The “Silence of Anti-Spiral” phenomena does not mean that the “Silence of Spiral” phenomena have vanished. Two phenomena exist at the same time and even in the same situation. Based on experience of coping with cyber police-related public sentiment crisis, we can find both “Silence of Spiral” phenomena and “Silence of Anti-Spiral” phenomena on the internet. Two theories have explained two different phenomena, do not conflict with each other, and should be combined in order to explain and cope with cyber police-related public sentiment crisis. When police-related events, internet user identities and

public sentiment crisis background change, theories needed to explain and cope with the public sentiment crisis change accordingly. It is absolutely wrong to adopt “Silence of Spiral” theory denying “Silence of Anti-Spiral” theory, or to adopt “Silence of Anti-Spiral” theory denying “Silence of Spiral” theory. Two theories are supplementary instead of contradictory.

**5. COPING STRATEGIES OF POLICE-RELATED PUBLIC SENTIMENT CRISIS**

Internet has been greatly developed nowadays, therefore, the course of police’s enforcing the law can be shown through a smart phone, by means of audio, picture and video. Police need to realize that their behaviour is supervised by the crowd, which shows progress of the society. Even if it is trivia, a police-related event can cause appalling and widespread influence among internet users. Coping strategies of police-related public sentiment crisis can be made based on SWOT, which include strength, weakness, opportunity and threat owned by the police (Figure 3)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Interior Factors Exterior Factors	(Strengths)	(Weaknesses)
O(Opportunities)	(SO) 1.Relieve news 2.Eliminate doubt 3.Summarize rules	(WO)1.Communicate with the crowd 2.Build an emergency system
T(Threats)	(ST) 1.Avoid rumor 2.Take precautions 3.Investigate We-media 4.Improve the law system	(WT)1.Collect Data 2.Avoid negative relation 3.Find the cyber leader

**Figure 3**SWOT matrix of coping strategies

According to SWOT, Standardized enforcement of the law is fundamental in order to avoid negative cyber public sentiment. Police’s behaviour of enforcing the law need coincide with people’s expectation, custom and interest. Being self-righteous or indulgent is not advisable. Being reasonable is the same as being lawful. If the two conflict, police need to persist in acting lawfully, and consider thoroughly people’s cognition and logic. Considering problems from the people’s perspective does not mean that police hesitate or become overcautious facing criminals. A criminal does not belong to the people. He is separated from the people from the moment of breaking the law. Police need to be sensible, warm-hearted, standardized and civilized, need to notice details, and conciliate conflicts, in order to take precautions against cyber police-related public sentiment crisis. After a cyber police-related public sentiment crisis finished, police need to summarize experience and lesson, educating all the staff, standardizing their behaviour of enforcing the law, and improving their ability of enforcing the law. The whole course can be summarized as Figure 4<sup>[7]</sup>. It is advisable to deal well with We-media and communicate

with them actively and warm-heartedly. When police-related events occur, police can invite influential We-media to the spot, issue news through their channels,

and listen to suggestions of We-media and the crowd, which satisfies

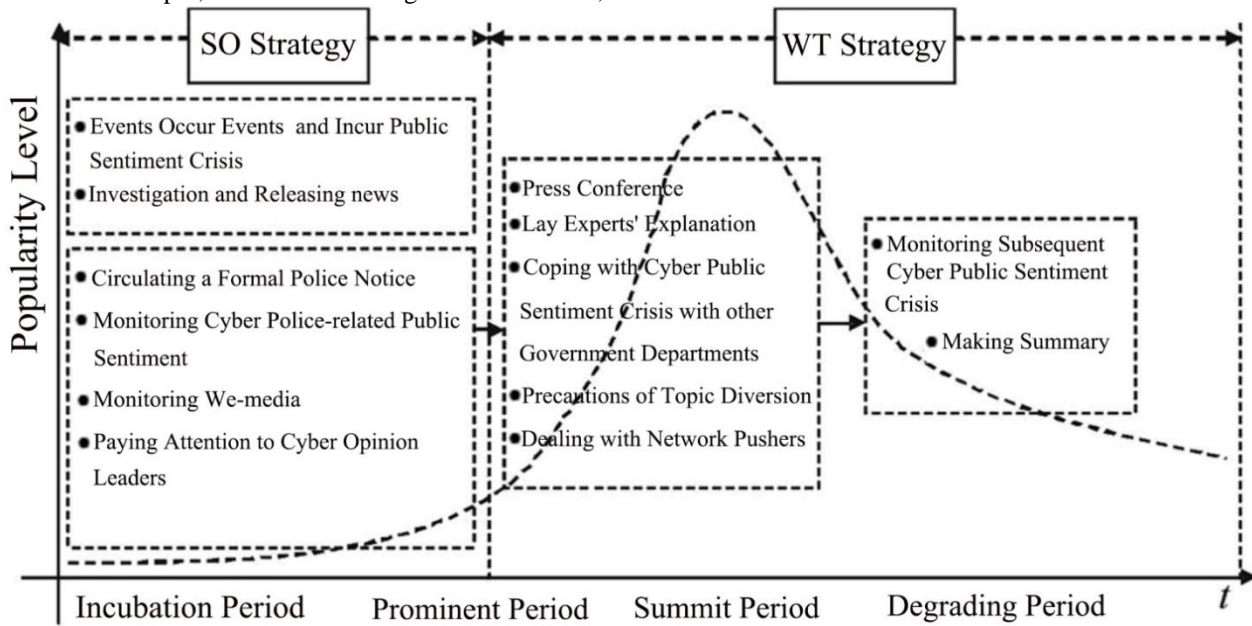


Figure 4 Coping strategies based on SWOT matrix

the crowd's expectation and need of thorough and complete information. According to the "Silence of Spiral" theory, once dominant cyber opinions are formed, they will rise and become more influential like a spiral. Therefore, police propaganda departments need to investigate facts, release news and form dominant cyber opinions as soon as possible, after police-related hot events occur.

Dominant opinions should be formed based on realistic investigation and objective description. If police want to hide some facts when releasing news, the situation will possibly become worse than imagined, since everyone on the spot has a smart phone, which means pictures, videos about the spot have already been stored and widespread on the internet. Pictures, audio and video are the best means to describe the spot. It is especially emphasized that pictures are not to be edited, and videos are not to be clipped, in order to be persuasive. If pictures are tuned and videos are clipped, the crowd may have doubt on their truth and reliability. Pictures and videos can be shown chronologically just as events happened. During the course of coping with police-related cyber public sentiment crisis, police should avoid standing against the crowd. If police's opinions do conflict with the crowd's, they need to explain patiently and actively, so as to eliminate the crowd's doubt and annoyance. There is another phenomenon that should be paid attention to. It is called "Inverse of Events", which means that the crowd's opinions change inversely for new facts and evidence have been exposed. For example, on May 3, 2015, a woman driver was pulled out of a car and hit by a man

driver in Chengdu, which was videoed by a driver following behind. This event immediately incurred great attention and criticism upon the man driver. One day later, more evidence and facts about the woman driver were disclosed. Before the man driver pulled out and hit her, the woman driver stopped the his car intentionally several times. The woman driver had broken traffic rules for 16 times a year. Some internet users showed more evidence that the woman driver was bad-tempered and much too selfish without considering other drivers' interest. Harsh and violent criticism was poured upon and woman driver and the man driver was forgiven by the crowd.

The police should stand with the crowd instead of against the crowd in order to avoid unnecessary conflict and reverse of police-related public sentiment. There are a lot of precedents during the course of coping with cyber police-related public sentiment crisis, as the police released news based on hasty and primary investigation instead of complete and perfect investigation. Flawed conclusion and police statement may recur harsh blame and criticism, since police-related events are highly noticeable and the crowd are clever and they can perceive almost every detail. With the development of the society and technology, people's desire to monitor government' departments and express viewpoints grows stronger. When unfair incidents happen, they do not keep silent. Instead they express viewpoints and opinions actively and freely. At the same time, smart phones and public monitors are able to record the whole course of cyber hot events, which everyone can see afterwards. Thus, it is not advisable to

hide something or counterfeit the spot in the We-media era. There are millions of eyes focused on cyber hot events, which demands police's higher ability to deal with the case and communicate with internet users. It is true that preconceived ideas keep a strong hold. But it is not suitable in We-media era, because internet has memory and internet users have memory. If some wants to form dominant cyber public opinions through faulty facts or fake excuses, he is sure to be blamed or scolded for new facts are to be disclosed. When cyber police-related hot events happen, police had better make a thorough and correct investigation of the whole course, without ignoring any details, and form objective description and statement. In this way, police propaganda departments are able to become an anchor in the whirlpool of cyber public sentiment crisis and regain its authority and centrality, and at the same time, tumultuous cyber public sentiment becomes rational and reasonable while widespread rumours vanish. Empty talk and lies are strictly prohibited during the course of coping with cyber police-related public sentiment crisis. One lie needs more lies to support, which is like a big beautiful bubble. It may cover the truth for some time, but it can not cover the truth for the whole time. No matter how big it becomes, it will be punctured by someone. It takes a long time and much hard work to regain police's authority and centrality in the field of cyber public sentiment crisis, but it is very easy to lose police's authority and centrality. Therefore, police should be cautious enough during the course of coping with cyber police-related public sentiment crisis, in case a trifle leads to a serious public sentiment crisis. "Silence of Anti-Spiral" phenomena are to be paid great attention to because cyber deviant opinions may transform into cyber dominant opinions as time goes on. According to the rule of contradiction transformation, principal contradiction may turn to be secondary contradiction under certain conditions while secondary contradiction may turn to be principal contradiction. Obviously, spread of cyber police-related public sentiment crisis is in accordance with this rule. During the course of spiral rise, dominant cyber opinions may be discarded since they have distinct default and develop into deviant opinions, while deviant cyber opinions may be widely accepted and spread by the crowd and develop into dominant opinions. When police propaganda departments hold dominant cyber opinions, they should be cautious, patient and easy-going facing the crowd's doubt and criticism. Response to the crowd's criticism and doubt should be urgent and instant. A modest and polite manner is also needed during the course of dealing with the crowd's doubt. If cyber blame and doubt is obviously unreasonable, police propaganda departments should combat determinedly while trying their best to acquire the majority people's support and understanding. In this way, criticizers may gradually realize that scolding, blame cannot solve problems or absorb others' attention,

and that unreasonable criticism can only cause cyber hospitality among the crowd.

## 6.CONCLUSION

According to the practice nowadays, the "Spiral of Silence" theory adapts to coping with police-related public sentiment crisis, prerequisites and foundations of which vary when the situation changes. When police-related hot events occur, police propaganda departments need to utter words actively, form dominant opinions and try their best to coincide with the majority of internet users, based on the "Spiral of Silence" theory.

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