

RUMORS

USES, INTERPRETATIONS, & IMAGES



Jean-Noël Kapferer

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RUMORS

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Introduction

In 1981, Procter & Gamble, one of the biggest American producers of mass-consumption articles, received several thousand phone calls every month from worried consumers wanting to know whether the company had dealings with Satan, as rumor had it. The company's emblem—a human face contemplating myriads of stars—was said to hide within it a great many Satanic signs. If one looked closely, the stars traced out the Devil's number: 666. Procter & Gamble was rumored to have made a pact with the Devil in order to increase sales, and was sending 10 percent of its profits to a satanic sect. Flaring up around 1980 in western Mississippi, this rumor spread rapidly, and soon reached the East Coast. It brought on a war for which Procter & Gamble was in no way prepared—a star wars of an unusual ilk. Shaken up by the meaning of these innocent stars, many religious groups even started boycotting products marked with the fatal symbol. A leaflet began circulating telling consumers which brands they should boycott. In 1987, a translation of the leaflet began circulating in France among the country's most religious populations.

Towards the end of 1966 in Rouen, a good-sized town in the northwest of France, rumor accused a well-known dress shop of being a front for white slave trading. The shop's phone rang off the hook with threatening calls. Pursued by the rumor, which no amount of denials succeeded in dispelling, the store's manager opted to give up the fight and leave town. Three years later, the same kind of rumor plagued Orléans in the Loire Valley. Clients deserted six widely known clothing stores run by Jews, word having it that young women were being kidnapped in the dressing rooms. Inspecting the basements of these stores, police were said to have found two or three young girls who had been drugged and were about to be handed over to a white slave trade network. The rumor took on considerable proportions, requiring full mobilization of the Parisian as well as local press to snuff out what came to be known as the "Orléans' rumor," or to at least reduce it to silence.

In January 1973, a rumor ran rife in both majority and opposition political circles. Georges Pompidou, the president of France, was said to be seriously ill, his life being imperiled; he would thus be unable to complete his seven-year term. Word leaked out across the nation, and was relayed by the press and media which spurred on questioning. Though never officially confirmed, the president's illness was in the conversational "top ten." Pompidou in fact succumbed to a terrible disease one year later.

On November 22, 1963, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated while the presidential cortège paraded through Dallas. The guilty party was almost immediately identified as Lee Harvey Oswald. An official commission was assigned the task of investigating this dark moment in America's history. Its conclusions, spelled out in the famous Warren Report, showed not the slightest uncertainty: President Kennedy was affirmed to have been assassinated by one single person, L. Oswald, acting under his own initiative. Right after the assassination, however, a rumor sprang up to the effect that there had been several gunmen in Dallas that day and thus a real conspiracy. Some people mentioned Fidel Castro, others the CIA, and still others the Mafia. What is clear is that the official hypothesis of one isolated gunman never convinced a certain portion of American public opinion.

All four of the above rumors were widely known. In each and every case, the same process took place. An idea, coalescing out of thin air, started proliferating and circulating. Its movement gained speed, reached a climax before falling off, split into small brush fires, and then faded, in most instances, into total silence. These four examples are, however, quite heterogeneous. The Orléans rumor was utterly groundless. Similarly, Procter & Gamble had nothing to do with the Devil. The rumor concerning President Pompidou's terminal illness was, on the contrary, altogether founded. And as for the rumor challenging the conclusions of the Warren report, uncertainty has never been dispelled, and room for doubt remains.

For the public, the word "rumor" conjures up a mysterious, almost magical phenomenon. An analysis of common terms used is revealing in this respect: rumors fly, crawl, slither, brood, and run rife. Physically speaking, rumors are surprising animals, swift and insatiable, belonging to no known family. Their effect on men seems to be akin to that of hypnosis: they fascinate, subjugate, seduce and set them ablaze.

The main thesis in this book is that this conception is erroneous. Rumors, far from being mysterious, comply with a strict logic whose mechanisms can be demonstrated. We can better answer today the important questions raised by rumors: how do they arise? Where do they come from? Why do they appear on a particular day in a particular group or in a particular place? One

can also interpret rumors: why do they always relate misfortune? What rules does a rumor's message obey? Beyond its apparent content, what is its hidden message?

Moreover, one cannot analyze the phenomenon of rumors without speaking of their role in everyday life. How do we live with rumors, how do we use them, for what purposes, and with what expected or unexpected consequences?

And a final question: can one snuff out a rumor? Up until now, most researchers have confined themselves to furnishing a descriptive or explanatory analysis of the phenomenon; but social realities require us to stride beyond analysis on towards prescription. Above all, it is through in-depth study of the problem of rumor control that one pierces to the very heart of its logic—to the fundamental phenomenon of belief.

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1

A Fleeting Phenomenon

Introduction

Rumors are everywhere, regardless of our social spheres. Rumors are also the oldest form of mass media. Before writing existed, word of mouth was the only social channel of communication. Rumors transmitted news, made and shattered reputations, set off riots and wars. Yet the advent of newspapers, the radio and, most recently, the audiovisual explosion, have not smothered rumors. In spite of the media, the public continues to glean some of its information from word of mouth. The arrival on the scene of mass media, instead of suppressing talk, has merely made it more specialized: each form of communication now has its own territory. Nevertheless, little is known about rumors. It is unusual for such an important social phenomenon to be so seldomly studied; as mysterious, almost magical events, rumors still constitute a sort of no man's land or *Mato Grosso* of knowledge.

Where does the phenomenon known as "rumors" begin and where does it leave off? Where does it differ from what is commonly called "word of mouth"? The concept in fact slips away just when one believes one has pinned it down. Everyone thinks he can recognize rumors when he comes across them, but very few people have yet managed to provide a satisfactory definition of them. On the whole, whereas everyone feels quite certain that rumors exist, there is no consensus concerning the phenomenon's precise delimitations.

How is the scarcity of works on the subject to be explained? The difficulty of the task is at least partly to blame. It is quite easy to study the press, radio, and television, as their messages are preserved. Anyone can peruse complete collections of magazines and newspapers. Similarly, tape recorders and VCRs allow one to listen to and/or see old broadcasts again. This is not at all the case with rumors. Except in very few cases, social scientists generally only hear of

them when it's already too late: when the rumor has faded away or is in its final stages. Only then can they carry out interviews about people's recollections of the rumor, which are subject to forgetfulness, rationalization, and distortion. In doing so, social scientists are not studying the rumor but rather, the trace it left behind in people's memories. The object thus lends itself but poorly to observation. Another reason for the dearth of studies on the subject stems from the fact that more energy has been spent on stigmatizing rumors than on clarifying their mainsprings.

Troubling Information

The first systematic work on rumors was done in America. The large number of rumors circulating during the Second World War, and their deleterious effects on the morale of the troops and population at large, led several research teams to look into the subject.

How did they define rumors? According to Allport and Postman, the founding fathers of the field, a rumor is "a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present" [6, p. ix] (numbers in brackets refer to works cited in the reference list at the end of this book). According to Knapp, it is "a proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification" [154, p. 22]. In Peterson and Gist's words, a rumor is "an unverified account or explanation of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event or issue of public concern" [201, p. 159].

According to these three very similar definitions, a rumor is primarily a piece of information: it provides news about a person or an event important in current goings-on. In that sense, rumors differ from legends, as the latter bear upon past facts. Secondly, rumors are for believing. People don't generally tell them with the sole intention of amusing others or giving them pause for thought: in that sense they differ from tall tales and funny stories. Rumors set out to convince people.

Having thus defined the concept, the above-mentioned researchers went on to present a series of examples and experiments. Strangely enough, all of their examples were cases of "false" rumors: ideas the public believed which turned out to be groundless. Yet cases of well-founded rumors are by no means in scarce supply: e.g., those concerning the illnesses of Reagan, Brezhnev, Andropov, and Pompidou. Every currency devaluation is preceded by rumors. In the business world, rumors foretell layoffs and transfers. In politics they antedate ministerial changings of the guard. In 1985, a few weeks

before the news was officially confirmed, rumor announced a great success on the part of French industry: the Americans were going to opt for Rita, a transmission system perfected by Thomson CSF, in equipping their land-based military forces. As it turned out, Rita was ultimately chosen over its British competitor.

The examples used by the above-mentioned researchers are tendentious, comprising only cases in which rumors have proven to be unfounded. And yet their definitions of rumors make no reference whatsoever to the truth-value of the information transmitted by rumors. Nowhere is it stated that a rumor is "false information"; rather they claim that a rumor is a piece of "unverified" information. Nothing is ever said concerning the verdict of subsequent verification.

Although researchers are aware that rumors aren't necessarily false, it seems that they nevertheless feel they have to discourage this form of expression. Allport and Postman only present cases of "false" rumors. Moreover, just in case their readers might not understand the dangers involved, they demonstrate the process by which rumors inevitably lead to error. Their experiments are well known: a person looks at a photograph of a street scene for a few seconds, and then tells what he has seen to a second person, who goes on to tell what he has heard to a third person, and so on. After the sixth or seventh relay, the information passed on bears but a vague resemblance to the original photograph.

Allport and Postman's experiment set out to show that rumors inescapably lead to error: as they spread, they get farther from the truth—in both literal and figurate senses—thus constituting a distortion of reality. We will see further along that this experimental simulation does not correspond to rumors' functioning in everyday life. There are cases where the message is carefully preserved in going from one person to the next; and, more importantly, rumors do not *take off from* the truth but rather *seek out* the truth. Let us dwell for a moment on this crucial point.

Rumors and Reality

In their experiment on the word-of-mouth chain, Allport and Postman attempt to demonstrate that as a message is passed farther and farther along, one gets farther and farther from the reality seen at the first relay. Word of mouth is thus presented as leading to a distortion of reality.

In everyday life, rumors rarely arise out of "reality"; they spring, rather, from raw, confused facts. A rumor's purpose is precisely that of explaining these raw facts, i.e., to posit a reality. Between 1980 and 1989, ten young men

called up for military duty disappeared near the Mourmelon military base in eastern France. So much for the raw facts. What really happened? No one knows. These facts spurred on two parallel processes [143]:

1. A police investigation, which to this day has come up with nothing.
2. Collective discussions among people living near Mourmelon attempting to explain the facts and uncover a reality, which could be agreed upon by the majority of them, that would account both for the disappearances and the failure of the official investigation. Rumors thus seek out a reality that does not await the verdict of official investigations. In any case, reality is not at the *origin* of a rumor; it is more likely to be a product of the rumor. In effect, there is no *a priori* theoretical reason why the interpretation provided by the rumor (involving a mad soldier hiding on the military base) necessarily differs from the reality that will someday be provided by a complete investigation. Rumors obviously involve collective invention of explanations at a distance, whereas detectives stick to the terrain and follow up even the slightest clues; their explanations could, nevertheless, very well coincide. Were that the case, the rumor would not suddenly stop being a rumor. As long as an official reality has not been prescribed by the police investigation, explanations going around must be taken for what they are worth and nothing more: popular beliefs which spread, not because they are true, but because they are popular (i.e., pleasing to the people).

FIGURE 1.1

The External Validity of Word-of-Mouth Chains

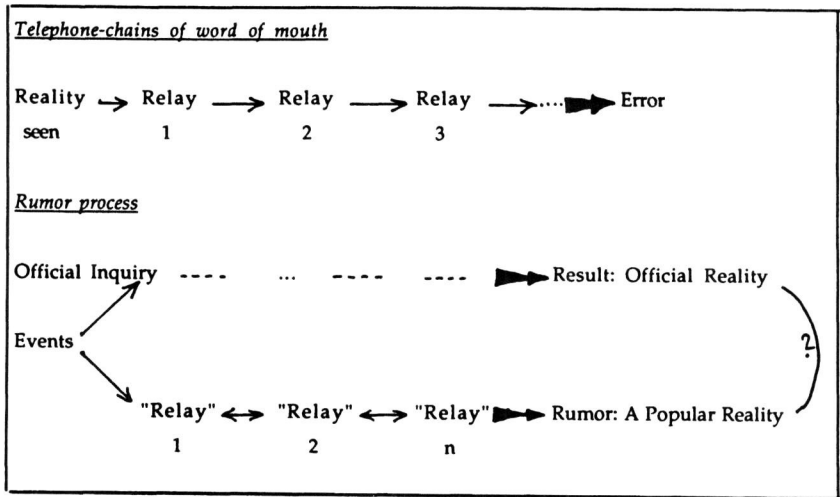


Figure 1.1 illustrates the differences between the laboratory simulation and the rumor process as it took place in our example. In the rumor process, the word “relay” is inappropriate, as no information is passed on unidirectionally. All concerned parties converse with each other, the rumor being the final consensus of their collective deliberations seeking out a convincing, encompassing explanation. As we shall see further along, rumors entail a subjective construction of reality.

Morale or Science?

By selecting only examples of false rumors, and stressing the dangers of word of mouth in their progressive distortion of reality, the aforementioned investigators reflected the concerns of their time. Working for the Office of War Information—one of their jobs being to stem the flow of rumors—such American social scientists took great pains to discredit this form of communication. While their concept of rumors was itself neutral, they carefully selected the examples they needed to prove their point. But there was a contradiction in their approach: were rumors always “false,” why would one need to worry about them? After all, in time and with experience, the population would have long since learned not to trust them.

In reality, rumors are bothersome because they may turn out to be true. During wartime, the enemy and its mythical ear (the fifth column) may discover a hidden truth through rumors—clear proof that they are not always unfounded. So as to avoid the risk of confidential information leaks, the Office of War Information undertook poster campaigns claiming that good citizens don’t spread rumors (“Shush, the walls have ears”). Unfortunately, this recommendation neglected an essential problem: that of teaching the public how to recognize a rumor. This brings us back in a very concrete way to the problem of definition. Now the three definitions examined above are of no use whatsoever to the public: for what exactly is “unverified information”? In everyday life, we rarely verify the information we get from others. Didn’t Jesus Christ himself scold Saint Thomas who felt seeing was believing, by saying, “Happy are those who believe without seeing”? Social life is based on confidence and on the delegation of the task of verification. When we tell others about something we read in the papers, we assume that it has been verified, though we have no proof that it has.

The notion of verification is thus indissociable from the person assumed to have done the verifying. If we have no confidence in him, we suspect that the information may be unverified. In this respect, the Warren Report is open to question in the minds of many Americans: they feel that the hypotheses laid out therein have never been checked, and thus do not believe that the

assassination was the isolated act of one single man. As we see, the criterion of verification reintroduces a serious dose of subjectivity.

Lastly, defining rumors as circulating through “unverified” information hinders the public from realizing that rumors generally present themselves with all the trappings of ideal verification, e.g., an eye-witness who states: “I have a friend who saw the ambulance coming out of the White House with his own eyes!” Rumors always reach us through a friend, colleague, or relative who was not himself the first-hand witness of the event in question, but a friend of that witness. Who is more believable than a first-hand witness? What better proof can one expect? A first-hand witness has the status of a spontaneous and disinterested reporter: his narrative is motivated only by an altruistic desire to communicate to his friends what he has seen and/or heard.

Hence every definition of rumors based on their supposedly “unverified” character leads to a logical dead end and an inability to distinguish rumors from plenty of other kinds of information spread by word of mouth or the media. Returning to the concrete problem raised by the Office of War Information, how is one thus to discourage rumors? It was impossible to stop Americans from communicating, especially during wartime, when anxiety (at an all-time high) was leading people to talk in order to dissipate some of it. The five “recommendations” made by Knapp to discourage the proliferation of rumors are particularly interesting. They unwittingly reveal why, in every era, rumors have been troublesome [154].

1. In the first place, the public must have total confidence in the *official media* (press, radio, and television) so as not to be tempted to seek information elsewhere.
2. In the second place, the public must have *total faith* in its leaders, and confidence that its government is doing its best to solve problems brought on by crisis and war. Everything possible must be done to avoid distrust and suspicion which only serve to feed rumors.
3. When something happens, a *maximum of information* should be disseminated as quickly as possible. Rumors arise from spontaneous questions the public asks itself to which no answers are provided. They satisfy the need to understand events, in the cases where events do not speak for themselves.
4. Broadcasting information provides no guarantee that it will be received; one must thus ensure that official reports be heard by everyone. *Pockets of ignorance must be eliminated.* (Knapp cites, for example, an at that time recent initiative on the part of the British army: “educational meetings” at which soldiers could touch on all subjects and receive correct answers in the clearest possible way.)
5. As boredom gives rise to interest in the slightest little rumors that dispel