

Rumor

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The concept of rumor covers a wide range of realities: false or unverified → news, of course, but also any journalistic errors or disinformation maneuvers when publicly revealed, any prejudices and stereotypes made into narratives, some → propaganda pieces if ambiguous enough, some hoaxes their authors do not kill, some realistic contemporary legends, and even some examples of viral marketing. The reason for this conceptual maelstrom is that, although the reality of rumor is old and well documented, new and problematical conceptualizations of rumor have emerged.

ORIGINS

The term “rumor” is ancient and originally had a meaning close to “reputation” and “fame.” In Rome, rumor was used in the context of justice, such as when Quintilius listed it among tools including records, tortures, oaths, and witnesses. This antiquated meaning of rumor remains embedded in the modern sense, which only adds to the confusion in current usage and explains why even scholars (e.g., Allport & Postman 1947) cite the *Aeneid* – “Rumor! What evil can surpass her speed?” – without knowing the original Latin reference is to “fame” (“Fama, malum qua non aliud uelocius ullum”).

The shift in definition coincided with the first published *rumor theory* by Louis William Stern, a German psychologist who in 1902 was the first scholar to reify rumor (unintentionally), giving it an autonomous mechanism, as if it were independent of those whispering it. When he suggested quantifying rumor, the abyss between rumor and reputation began to open (but reputation clearly remains unquantifiable, so that one cannot say without irony, “Her reputation is 11 times better than his”). Stern inherited the preoccupations of forensic psychology: in an experimental protocol he treated rumor as an objective testimony that travels along a chain of subjects (physically, he lined up volunteers in a room and told the first person to repeat a story to another, and so forth). Then he applied quantitative methods to compare the versions from different witnesses of the rumor; logically, each step caused a loss of information. Even if the technique is efficient and the results spectacular, it assumes that the message is composed of details that remain themselves undefined. This sleight of hand modeled rumor as an account of details that Stern could represent visually with tables. It describes rumor propagation as a

message diffusing by itself, traveling toward the worst, coming from truth and becoming false.

The new sense of rumor spread slowly. In 1911, one of Stern's colleagues, Rosa Oppenheim, was the first to link *rumor and the press*. She writes about her surprise upon observing that newspapers can print unverified or bad information and wonders why refutations are slow to arrive and then go unnoticed (→ Objectivity in Reporting; Journalism). Around the same time, the psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung, Stern's Swiss correspondent, published a brief article reporting his study of the diffusion of a rumor in a classroom. More than the telling of a good story, Jung concluded, the girls shared "etiologic conditions," a way to suppose the existence of a collective unconscious and to interpret details as symptoms of a deeper trouble. Oppenheim and Jung's heritage is a burden: all of the media must struggle against popular falsehood, that is, rumor, and all rumors are suspected of carrying a second message to decipher.

THE MODERN CONCEPT OF RUMOR

However, the canonic model of rumor diffusion was still to come. One of the touchstones of the *modern concept* is diffusion control, and its father is Gordon Allport, a former student of Stern and one of the most prominent social psychologists in the United States. When World War II began, the army engaged Allport officially in monitoring and enhancing American civilian morale. He proposed using rumor as a thermometer. The hidden goal was to monitor the penetration of propaganda the enemy broadcast over short-wave radio (Kishler et al. 1968). Allport also created rumor clinics, with civilians, police officers, and war correspondents in charge of debunking rumors and Nazi propaganda and publishing the official results in the syndicated columns of the biggest newspapers in the country (→ Propaganda in World War II). Rumors became identified as enemy matter.

After the war, Allport and one of his Harvard colleagues, Leo Postman, published two articles that met with instant success, even if some of their findings are highly questionable (Allport & Postman 1947). For example, they assert a *basic law of rumor* ($R \sim i \times a$), where the quantity of rumors in circulation (R) depends on the importance of the news (i) and the ambiguity of the evidence (a), a formulation of common sense at once alarming for its positivism and impossible to measure for any of its proposed terms.

Following the same tack, they propose a *generalization of the rumor formula* capable of describing a *basic course of distortion*: rumors travel, they say, with *three biases* – leveling, sharpening, and assimilation – losing most of their details, recomposing themselves from only certain aspects, and associating their meanings with pre-existing prejudices and stereotypes. If these mechanisms were obvious in the laboratory (the book includes 17 extensive experiments; → Experiment, Laboratory), they have become obsolete in life. Some of the most important rumors, like the 1969 report that Paul McCartney of the Beatles pop group was secretly dead, behaved nothing like what Allport and Postman described (Rosnow 1991). Even the endeavors to see rumor as an alternative mode of communication, in Africa in particular, tend to demonstrate the contrary (Ekambo 1985).

If rumors diffuse among informal and auxiliary channels, such as word of mouth, clubs, or other circles (Shibutani 1966; → Communication Networks; Organizational

Communication), they travel as well among formal ones, such as media and official statements, which may have more effect on audiences. Research focuses on informal channels and cognitive factors, because these resemble the popular idea of rumor. But rare → case studies do show the importance of media, the most-quoted source of rumor (Kapferer 1989; → Risk Communication). The media, and journalists particularly, diffuse rumors on four types of occasions: when they are abused by rumor; when they try to refute it; when they do special coverage of rumors; or when rumors play a part in movies or television scenarios (→ Fictional Media Content).

Folklorists and ethnologists have led the latest evolution in rumor research during the last 30 years. To the idea of rumor as a diffusion process, they add that extensive traditional and cultural background is necessary for the hearer to understand a rumor (→ Storytelling and Narration; Suspension of Disbelief; Popular Communication). Contemporary legends often share narrative characteristics with rumors. Rumor studies, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, have grown more complex, including research fields other than law or journalism.

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