



Rumors of Grace and Terror

Stephen O'Leary 
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One of the favorite observations of journalists who feel threatened by the changing face of news on the Internet is that the Net all too often becomes a breeding ground for rumors and conspiracy theories. There is much truth in this observation.

Recall the controversy a few years back over the crash of TWA Flight 800, when [Internet rumor-mongers found a substantial audience](#) for the theory that the jet was brought down by a missile launched from a US Navy ship in the area.

Or remember the [Internet responses to Princess Diana's death](#), when postings appeared within hours on Net newsgroups alleging that she had been murdered and speculating on the motives of her killers.

Any large-scale tragedy naturally invites speculation on the 'story behind the story.' It should come as no surprise that the recent terrorist attacks on New York and Washington have provided ample fodder for the purveyors of urban legends, crackpot conspiracies, and apocalyptic speculation.

What is unusual about the rumors swirling over the Internet in response to these horrific events is that they seem to have appeal far beyond the ordinary audience of fanatics and conspiracy theorists. As Janelle Brown [contemptuously observes](#) in Salon.com's rumor roundup, 'The kooks are coming out of the woodwork.'

Bridget Harrison of PageSix.com, [complains that her inbox had been flooded](#) with 'doomsday predictions, conspiracy theories and vitriolic rants about religion and the future of the planet,' and plaintively asks, 'Where do they all come from? It's as if we're living in some medieval village where guessing and gossip pass for knowledge.'

When rumors go mainstream

The frustration expressed by these and other writers begs the question: how far have we come from the medieval village to the global village? And, just how many 'kooks' -- is it fair to call them global village idiots -- are out there on the Net?

Judging by the rumors that have circulated the past few weeks, the answers to these questions are: not very far, and, more than we'd like to believe.

Stories that almost any regular user of e-mail is likely to have encountered in the past few weeks include the following: a Nostradamus prophecy anticipated the attack on the World Trade Center; a coded message predicting the attack can be found in a Microsoft 'Wingdings' graphics font designed long before the recent events; 4000 Jews were warned against going to the World Trade Center on the day of the attack; filmed footage of Palestinians celebrating the attacks on the streets of Jerusalem was actually ten-year-old CNN stock footage of the Intifada; photos of the burning buildings reveal the face of Satan in clouds of smoke; another wave of terrorist attacks was planned for September 22; a man caught in the explosion of one of the WTC towers rode bits of the falling building down to safety; and an unburned Bible was found in the smoldering wreckage of the

Pentagon.

Aided by the lightning-fast technology of the Internet, these rumors (all of them [subsequently proven false](#)) proliferated at an astounding rate.

One day after the September 11 terrorist attack, over one hundred of the 120 students in my class at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School had received e-mails containing the [spurious Nostradamus prophecy](#): 'In the city of York there will be a great collapse, Two twin brothers torn apart by chaos, while the fortress falls the great leader will succumb. The third big war will begin when the big city is burning. Nostradamus, 1654'

Newspapers printed articles [debunking the story](#), noting that Nostradamus died in 1566. [About.com](#) and other Web sites [featured stories](#) proving that the verses in question originated in an 1997 essay, published on the Web, by a Canadian college student who was deliberately parodying the vague language and mystical obscurity of Nostradamus's writings.

Curiously, the publicity given to exposing the fake seems to have had little impact on the public's fascination with it. Four days after the terrorist attacks, the bestselling book on Amazon.com was [Nostradamus: The Complete Prophecies](#).

Internet columnist [Aaron Schatz](#), who surveys fluctuating requests for information on the popular Lycos search engine, [reported that](#) 'Nostradamus searches actually increased midweek, despite a number of media outlets reporting on [the prophecy's] fallacy.'

It's difficult to impute significance to such data, but the implications are disturbing: it seems that the experts who debunked the prophecy were no match for people's hunger to find supernatural significance, whether in forged verses from a famously obscure sixteenth-century mystic or in the arcane codings of software engineers.

The rapidity with which these stories have gained credibility among ordinarily sensible folk indicates that the impact of the terrorist attacks is several orders of magnitude above that of any news story since the birth of the worldwide computer network.

People who never heard, and certainly would never have taken seriously, the Internet-fed rumors that [Princess Diana was killed](#) by the British or Israeli Secret Service or international munitions manufacturers acting in concert with her Royal in-laws, or that [she was pregnant](#) at the time of her death, were now forwarding e-mails with all sorts of wild allegations.

A Need for News

To understand the appeal of these stories and their sudden increase in credibility, it may be useful to think of them as a sort of modern folklore, generated by new technologies but serving an ancient function. Legends, rumors, and spurious prophecies perform an important work in our culture: they help people come to grips with tragedy and historical change by bringing order out of chaos, giving meaning to apparently meaningless violence, and reassuring us with tales of survival in the midst of unimaginable horror.

What may be hard for mainstream journalists to understand is that, in crisis situations, the social functions of rumor are virtually indistinguishable from the social functions of 'real news.' People spread rumors via the Net for the same reason that they read their papers or tune into CNN: they are trying to make sense of their world.

Those who practice journalism as a profession take the view that their job is to ferret out facts and separate them from unproven rumors, and this is surely true. But we all saw, in the past few weeks, television and print journalists trying to cope with what

we might term the mythic function of news: the anchors choking back tears, the reporters so overcome by the sacrificial imagery they were mediating that they had no words to encompass the depth of emotion.

The types of stories that spread in the wake of this catastrophe tell us something about what people wanted and needed to hear.

The Nostradamus and **Wingdings** stories follow an ancient technique known as vaticinium ex eventu (prophecy after the fact): they provided proof that the attacks were predicted, foreordained, and therefore meaningful in some way.

The stories of miraculous survival offer reassuring evidence of divine providence. Clearly, only the hand of God could have preserved a Bible as the only untouched remnant of a destroyed building, or saved a man who fell from the 71st, 82nd, or 92nd floors (depending on which version one read) of a collapsing skyscraper.

The photographs of walls of smoke containing the **image of Satan** are a sort of Rorschach test, revealing more than any ink-blot could about our search for a supernatural explanation of evil. The rumor of CNN's supposed use of stock footage indicates both a general distrust of the media, and a wish of some specific audiences to defend the Palestinians against the charge of callous glee in the face of American suffering.

The rumor that **4000 Jews were warned** not to go to work at the World Trade Center that day (which was **widely disseminated** in the Islamic press) is clearly the work of anti-Zionists who seek an alternative explanation for the terror that could deflect attention from Muslims. One anonymous Internet author went so far as to claim that 'The only people who benefited from this act of terror are the Jews. This act is not beyond the capabilities and evil deeds of Israel. In this case it seems that it is clear to all that the Jews/Israel have most to gain and should be considered as a possible source behind this act.'

The Western world finds its demons in **clouds of smoke** and in the **face of Osama bin Laden**. The popular demonology of the Islamic world focuses on the purported international Zionist conspiracy. In each case, the world-wide reach and the remarkable speed of new communication technologies have fed the collective imaginations of modern audiences in ways undreamed in centuries past.

The Internet has become a new arena of conflict, an ideal environment for the spawning and evolving of propaganda, disinformation, and the collective mythologies which provide ideological support for both religious fanatics and secular nationalists. Journalists may report on rumors in order to debunk them, but even the most skeptical reporters cannot avoid spreading false stories to credulous people.

It hardly matters how strongly we resist being drawn into the dissemination of propaganda and rumor; in a context so laden with emotion, our work must inevitably contribute to the evolving of cultural myths. It will be instructive to observe how this mythmaking in the global village will both respond to, and affect, the conflict that is to come.