A MASS POISONING RUMOR IN EUROPE

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Abstract For more than ten years, a rumor has been spreading in Europe. Transmitted from hand to hand on a leaflet, this rumor accuses ten well-known brands of food products of being toxic and producing cancer. Because of its persistence, extensiveness, and tangible nature, the rumor lends itself to empirical research. This article presents the most significant results of a number of studies assessing the rumor's penetration, its modes of diffusion, and its behavioral effects.

For more than ten years, a contamination rumor has been circulating in France. Long-lived, despite all official denials, this rumor is passed along not by word of mouth but from hand to hand, in the form of a leaflet. Thus, by its tangibility and durability, this rumor lends itself to empirical investigations. Such analyses are all the more necessary in so far as this leaflet has gained considerable terrain: in France, it is estimated that about half of all housewives have been exposed to this rumor. In other words, by its persistence, pervasiveness, and persuasiveness, this rumor—known as "the leaflet of Villejuif"—is one of the most important rumors France has had for many years. It has also spread to many other European countries; translated versions are now circulating in Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and abroad in the Middle East and Africa.

A sign of a rampant mistrust of modern food and technology, this rumor testifies to the vulnerability of public opinion across all social classes. This article is divided into two parts: the first part presents the facts and the second draws implications from such an extensive phenomenon.

History and Diffusion of the Leaflet of Villejuif

In the spring of 1976, the French headquarters of major food companies operating in France (Coca-Cola, Cadbury-Schweppes, Martini,

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BSN, Gervais-Danone, and others) received from their local salesmen a leaflet, handed to them by a friend, colleague, or some local retailer who had just received it. Typed on an ordinary typewriter, this leaflet urged consumers to boycott ten popular brands of food or beverages: Coke, Schweppes, Martini, the Amora Mustard, Banga orange juice, etc. According to the leaflet, these brands contained additives which despite being authorized in France actually would be toxic or carcinogenic. To warrant this fear, the leaflet referred to an anonymous source: a "Hospital in Paris" (there are 37 hospitals in Paris) having conducted research on food additives. The leaflet presented a threefold classification of all food additives "authorized for consumption by the French Ministry of Health"; 17 were said to be "toxic and carcinogenic," 27 were "suspect" and under "current scrutiny," and the others were labeled "innocuous." To encourage consumers to boycott the dangerous brands and products, the leaflet lists all food additives pertaining to these three categories, each additive being referred to by its code name.[1]

Soon new versions of the leaflet appeared during the same year, spontaneously passed on from hand to hand, each of them typed on different but still ordinary typewriters. They were identical word-for-word with the first version, with two major exceptions: new brands were added to the list of those to be boycotted, and the attributed source became more precise. The mention of a "Paris hospital specializing in cancer research" was replaced by an explicit attribution to the Hospital of Villejuif. Villejuif is the name of a small city on the outskirts of Paris whose hospital is internationally famous for its advanced research on cancer (Figure 1).

Such explicit reference prompted internal inquiries at the hospital. No researcher recognized any relationship with the leaflet. The Hospital of Villejuif issued repeated official denials pointing out the usurpation of its name for fraudulent purposes. In fact, toxicologists and cancer researchers who examined the leaflet soon identified its deceptive content: many additives known to be dangerous, hence unauthorized in France, were declared innocuous by the leaflet. Conversely, the additives declared toxic by the leaflet were held to be innocuous by health officials and experts. For instance, the leaflet points out E 330 as the most dangerous and carcinogenic food additive of all. The incongruous nature of such accusation emerges given the fact that E 330 is nothing but the harmless citric acid, found in citrus fruit.

1. In the Common Market, in order to overcome translation difficulties, all food additives are designated by a code name, *E* plus three digits (*E* meaning Europe). For instance, citric acid is E 330 and orthophosphate of sodium is E 339. All food brands containing additives must specify their code names among the ingredients on their packaging.

DISTRIBUE PAR L'HOPITAL DE VILLEJUIF

Tous les ADDITIFS sont actuellement AUTORISES en FRANCE, mais doivent être indiqués : Freinez l'utilisation de ces additifs en sélectionnant les produits que vous achetez CAR : C'EST LE CONSOMMATEUR QUI CONDITIONNE LES OPTIONS DES FABRIQUANTS.

PENSEZ A LA SANTE DE VOS ENFANTS

TOXIQUES CANCERIGENES

102-110-120-123-124-127-211-220-225-230-250-251-252-311-330-407-450

330 : LE PLUS DANGEREUX (SCHWEPPES CITRON, certains apéritifs, BANGA, MOUTARDE AMORA, "LA VACHE QUI RIT", etc...)

SUSPECTS (étude en cours)

125-131-141-142-150-153-171-172-210-212-213-214-215-216-217-231-232-241-336-341-340-460-462-463-465-466-477-.

INNOFENSIFS.

100-101-103-104-105-111-121-122-132-140-151-160-161-162-170-174-175-180-181-200-201-202-203-236-237-239-260-261-26-270-280-281-282-290-293-300-301-302-304-305-206-307-308-309-322-325-326-327-331-332-333-334-335-336-337-401-402-403-404-405-406-408-410-411-413-414-420-421-422-440-470-471-472-473-474-475-480-.

INTESTINS (perturbations) ..... : E221-222-223-224-226.
DERME (la peau) ..... : E220-231-232-233.
DIGESTION (perturbations) ..... : E330-339-340-341-400-461-462-463-466
CALCUL RENAUX ..... : E447
PRODUITS DANGEREUX ..... : E102-110-120-124-127.
DESTRUCTION vitamine B12 ..... : E220
ACCIDENTS VASCULAIRES ..... : E230-251-252-dans la charcuterie.
CHOLESTEROL ..... : E320-321.
SENSIBILITE CUTANEE ..... : E311-312
APHTES ..... : E330
CREMES GLACEES digestion ..... : E407
PRODUITS CANCERIGENES ..... : E131-142-210-212-213-214.

EXEMPLES :

E102 : bonbons (PIE QUI CHANTE)
E330 : LE PLUS DANGEREUX : BANGA, canada dry, certaines limonades ...ETC...
E120 : PASTIS DUVAL.
E150 : PICON, MARTINI.
E339 : COCA COLA .....

Figure 1. The Leaflet of Villejuif.
Translation: Distributed by the Villejuif Hospital. All these food additives are authorized in France. Block the usage of these additives by selecting the products you buy. It is the consumer that bears upon manufacturers' decisions. Think of your children. Toxic carcinogenic: 102-110-120 . . . Suspicious: 125-131-141 . . . Harmless: 100-101 . . .

However, few people—except the specialists—understand the meaning of the mysterious code names of all food additives. Furthermore, the general public has not the slightest knowledge of the pros and cons of each additive, even citric acid. Since the official denials were hardly heard, the leaflet's diffusion went on unchallenged, in a country where any departure from truly natural products is certain to arouse latent fears and anxieties. It was still circulating in 1988 in France; translated it has circulated in other European countries.

EXTENT AND PATTERNS OF DIFFUSION

To measure the extent of the rumor's diffusion, exposure questions were inserted in standard omnibus polls. A national representative sample of French housewives was interviewed by Institut Français d'Opinion Publique, a member of the Gallup organization in France. The sampling methodology is the quota method: sample representativeness was based on specific quotas of age, occupation of household head, region, and type of habitation (Table 1).

After three years of spontaneous diffusion, 43% of French housewives had read the leaflet. The observed decline between 1979 and 1983 is mostly due to forgetting among those exposed to the leaflet early on. Actually, the number of forgetters is larger than this decrease since new persons had an opportunity to encounter the leaflet during this period. In the 1983 poll, among those declaring having read the

Table 1. Percentage of Respondents Who Were Exposed to the Leaflet

	April 1979	April 1980	October 1983
Have read the leaflet	43%	39%	33%
Have not read the leaflet	57	61	67
Have heard about it	8	8	7
Have not heard about it	49	53	60
N	932	990	939

QUESTIONS: Have you had the opportunity, at your home, at work, or anywhere else, to read a document or leaflet warning consumers against the ingestion of additives in food, designated by the letter *E*? (yes or no)

If not, have parents, friends, or colleagues spoken to you about such a leaflet warning consumers against the additives in food? (yes or no)

Table 2. Respondents Who Were Exposed to the Leaflet, by Age, Income, and Family Size, October 1983

	Percentage	*N*
Entire sample	33%	939
Age		
15–24	41	92
25–34	39	176
35–49	44	240
50–64	31	203
65+	14	228
Monthly family income[a]		
Unknown	22	138
Below 3,000 F.F.	20	95
3,000–4,999 F.F.	23	202
5,000–6,499 F.F.	30	111
6,500–9,499 F.F.	40	212
9,500+ F.F.	52	182
Family size		
One person	17	200
Two persons	30	260
Three persons	41	186
Four persons	40	293

QUESTION: Have you had the opportunity, at your home, at work, or anywhere else, to read a document or leaflet warning consumers against the ingestion of additives in food, designated by the letter *E*? (yes or no)

[a] One U.S. dollar = six F.F.

leaflet, 7% said they did it this same year and 11% said they read it between 1980 and 1982.

As expected, the leaflet's diffusion is uneven: it followed selective paths, penetrating those most concerned by its allegations (Degh and Vazsonyi, 1975). As shown in Table 2, there is a strong relationship between exposure to the leaflet and age, socioeconomic status, and the presence of children in the household. Since it explicitly urges mothers to boycott a number of brands popular among children, the leaflet reaches high penetration rates among mothers having children of an age to be affected by these brands.

In rumor research, there are frequent allusions to rumors being mostly persuasive among the poorly educated. In his famous study in the psychology of panic, Cantril (1966:112) found that critical ability was correlated with education. Confronted by Orson Welles's "Inva-

sion from Mars'' broadcast, about half as many people with a college education, as compared to those with grammar school training, believed the broadcast was a real news report. For Shibutani (1966:123), education becomes a crucial variable in some rumors in that it provides a better basis for judgment. In contrast with these allusions, the leaflet reached its highest penetration rates among the wealthiest (and most educated) households. This is probably related to the fact that in France the consumerist movement drew most of its troops from the educated segment. The audience of consumerist magazines is upwardly skewed: its rate of penetration increases with the level of education. In essence, the leaflet of Villejuif provides confirmatory and allegedly scientific evidence of consumerist fears; heavily advertised national brands would be ready to incorporate any food additive or coloring in order to boost sales. Search of supportive information is a basis of selective exposure to communications; hence the success of the leaflet.

THE OPINION LEADERS AND THE RUMOR

Because the leaflet made direct reference to health, cancer, and children, it was hypothesized that the public might ask opinion leaders for advice, being supposedly able to understand the very technical content of the message. Actually some people had found the leaflet posted in the waiting room of their physician or in hospitals. Many cases of primary school teachers handing out the leaflet directly to pupils in the classroom were also reported.

In order to assess physicians' and teachers' attitudes, two semiquantitative surveys were conducted at the end of 1983. One hundred physicians were randomly drawn from the physician national directory and interviewed by telephone. One hundred primary school teachers were recruited by the quota method and interviewed on a face-to-face basis. Despite the small sample sizes, the figures are unambiguous (Table 3). The teachers who had read the leaflet or heard of it (49%) were largely persuaded by it. Physicians were split as to their opinion. However, the agreement figures among physicians are high (16/39) when one recalls that the leaflet dealt with health issues and spoke of E 330 (citric acid) as a major carcinogenic substance! Are opinion leaders themselves less knowledgeable than expected? To test this hypothesis, this particular additive was presented to the teachers and physicians under both its full name and, separately, its code name (E 330). Interviewees were asked if it was harmful or harmless (Table 4).

In general, when presented under its code name, citric acid is not recognized. Most teachers and physicians refuse to state an opinion:

Table 3. Impact of the Leaflet on Opinion Leaders

	Physicians (N = 101)	Primary School Teachers (N = 100)
Exposure[a]		
Have read the leaflet	18%	30%
Have heard of it	21%	19%
Have not read or heard	61%	51%
	Physicians Exposed to the Leaflet (N = 39)[b]	**Teachers Exposed to the Leaflet (N = 49)[b]**
Agreement with the leaflet[c]		
Agree strongly	4	17
Agree	12	22
Disagree	9	1
Disagree strongly	5	7
Check of the validity of the leaflet[d]		
No	31	38
Yes	8	11

[a] "Have you read or heard of the 'leaflet of Villejuif,' a list evaluating the toxicity of food additives and accusing some brands of marketing food products containing these dangerous additives?"

[b] Because of the small sample size, only raw figures are reported.

[c] (Asked of those exposed to the leaflet) "On the whole do you agree or disagree with the content of the 'leaflet of Villejuif'?"

[d] (Asked of those exposed to the leaflet) "Have you tried to check the validity of the content of the 'leaflet of Villejuif'?"

they do not know. Under its full name, only a minority of physicians and teachers say they do not know. Hence one of the roots of the leaflet persuasiveness resides in the fact that it presents only code names, thus preventing any recognition of the additives behind these codes.

However, it is striking that in spite of a clear identification, 3% of the physicians still declare "citric acid" as carcinogenic and 11% as bad for health! Among teachers, the leaflet of Villejuif is clearly the source of the carcinogenic image of E 330. Of the whole sample of teachers, 9% declared E 330 carcinogenic and 20% said it was bad for health. But among only those who had either read or heard of the leaflet (49 out of

Table 4. Percentage of Physicians and Teachers Declaring an Innocuous Additive to Be Carcinogenic or Bad for Health

	Physicians		Teachers	
	E 330	Citric Acid	E 330	Citric Acid
Carcinogenic	2%	3%	9%	1%
Bad for health	11	11	20	19
Innocuous	5	76	6	57
Do not know	82	10	65	23
N	101	101	100	100

QUESTION: I shall name a number of food chemical additives. Please tell me, for each of them, if it is carcinogenic, bad for health, or innocuous.

100), 16% declared E 330 carcinogenic and 18% said it was bad for health. The carcinogenic image of E 330 in the entire sample is exclusively due to those exposed to the leaflet. The similarity of "bad for health" figures suggests that teachers share on the whole the same suspicion of the food additives when they appear under their mysterious code name.

Finally, among both physicians and teachers exposed to the leaflet, only a minority has tried to check the validity of the leaflet (Table 3). These opinion leaders made up their opinion alone. They took the leaflet's word or just disbelieved it. Analysis of verbatims shows that no teacher called or wrote to the Hospital of Villejuif: the main modes of validity checking were speaking about it with colleagues or asking a local consumer organization. Among physicians, only two (out of eight who checked) directly asked the presumed source, the Hospital of Villejuif.

Despite their status and role as opinion leaders, physicians and teachers reacted in the same fashion as the layman; they rarely check the rumor's validity. When they do, instead of directly asking the source, they discuss the rumor within their reference group. This is clearly one of the motors of rumor diffusion (Kapferer, 1987).

In a postindustrial society, people have less and less understanding of their environment (Miller, Suchner, and Voelker, 1980). They rely on experts to make up their minds. Since many physicians themselves believed that citric acid was carcinogenic, taking a leaflet's word, one cannot expect the layman to be more resistant to persuasion.

THE LEAFLET'S CHANNELS OF DISTRIBUTION

How and where did people receive the leaflet? The national survey of October 1983 shows a large variety of modes of diffusion. Among all the respondents (N = 939), 3% found the leaflet in their mailbox, or someone handed it out at school (1%) or at the entry of banks, supermarkets, factories, and offices (5%). Not surprisingly it was also handed out in hospitals, or by nurses, while making visits to patients (2%). It was found posted in youth clubs, cultural associations, and sports clubs (1%). In fact, fooled by the leaflet's apparent credibility, ordinary people benevolently photocopied the leaflet and organized its diffusion in public places or among their friends, relatives, colleagues, and neighbors.

By far the largest quoted source of diffusion is the press (11%). Actually, the companies concerned by the leaflet hold files of the journals that reproduced the leaflet to warn their readers about food additives and some well-known brands. These are not the regional or national journals or magazines but the countless local, specialized, in-house association bulletins and magazines. The unqualified presence of the leaflet in this press not only diffuses the information at once to large audiences but confers additional credibility to the leaflet: it is akin to an endorsement effect.

When warned early enough, corporations attacked by the leaflet have prosecuted these journals on the basis of diffusion of false information as well as moral and financial prejudice. Arrangements were possible if the journal agreed to apologize in a subsequent issue and to distribute open denials to their readers.

After being simply handed out and later found in the press, the leaflet has recently appeared in books. Two cases were reported and led to lawsuits against the editors. The leaflet's contents were reproduced in a textbook on natural sciences for primary school pupils and in a vulgarization book on cancer written by a physician—a nonspecialist—promoting homeopathy. In both cases, the editors were required to issue denials and to make due corrections, but only in the next printings or editions of the books.

BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS OF THE RUMOR

A major concern of all companies having their brands quoted on the leaflet was the call to stop buying these brands. The author interviewed their brand managers; no figure could be obtained concerning the turnover losses due to the leaflet. Sales variations are caused by a number of variables; it is difficult to isolate the impact of the leaflet of Villejuif.

Table 5. Behavioral Effects of the Leaflet: Percentage of Respondents Who Reported Each Behavior

I posted it in my home	12%
I use it when going shopping	20
I have spoken about it to other persons	40
I have shown it to other persons	24
I xeroxed it for distribution	3
I gave it to somebody to be rediffused	2
None of these behaviors	39
N	121

QUESTION: Here are a number of reactions one can have to the leaflet. Could you tell me, for each of them, if it is what you did after you read the leaflet. (Asked of those recalling the leaflet; multiple answers were possible.)

In any case, no sharp drop in consumer sales which could be attributed to a boycott was ever noticed. The most anxious were two companies experiencing a slow but steady downward sales trend for products attacked by the leaflet: a processed cheese and an orange juice. However, the causal effect of the leaflet was clear-cut only on the shipments made directly to schools. Many schools stopped providing this brand at meals, explicitly out of fear of doing harm to children.

In order to assess the reality of the leaflet's persuasive impact on consumers' purchases, it was decided to conduct a field quasi-experiment. Five hundred copies of the leaflet (Figure 1) were distributed overnight in the mailboxes of houses in the middle-class suburbs of Rennes, a French provincial town. One week after the distribution, 150 housewives were contacted at their home by trained interviewers in order to measure the impact of the leaflet and also to give them all official denials of the leaflet, at the end of the interview. Among these, 81% (121 persons) spontaneously declared having recently read a leaflet warning consumers against additives in food products.

Table 5 summarizes the behavioral effects of the rumor. Interviewees were asked if they had followed one or more of six suggested actions. The main behavioral outcome is the communication of the rumor to other people, either by reproducing the leaflet or by speaking of its content. It was brought to stores to guide shopping by 20% of the leaflet readers.

Asked whether they had stopped buying specific brands or products after reading the leaflet, 19% (base = 121) admitted such an incidence. Purchase cessation intentions reach 69%; the majority of the remaining

31% declared that they did not usually buy the brands pointed out by the leaflet.

Spontaneous recall of the brands quoted in the leaflet proved high. For instance, among the people having read the leaflet (121) 45% recalled that Coca-Cola was said to be dangerous for health, 40% recalled the Banga orange juice, and 37% remembered the brand of cream cheese. These highest figures concern three brands which are very popular among children.

Finally, when asked to spontaneously recall which chemical food additives were carcinogenic, 29% of the leaflet readers said E 330, the only additive recalled among all those mentioned in the leaflet. Because it was singled out by the leaflet as the most dangerous, the readers polarized their attention on it.

Analysis and Discussion

THE LEAFLET PERSUASIVENESS

What makes a simple leaflet typed on an ordinary typewriter such a persuasive means of communication, not only among consumers but also teachers and physicians? Social psychologists working on persuasive communications have pointed out the importance of source, media, reception, and motivational factors in persuasion.

In fact, the leaflet of Villejuif optimizes each of these persuasion-enhancing variables. First of all, the leaflet is backed by a potent source effect. It presents itself as a direct release of research of this renowned center for cancer research, highly ranked on the two factors that make up source credibility: expertise and disinterest. Persuasion research has long demonstrated that high and low credibility sources lead to less remembering of the message content (McGuire, 1969:198). Acting as a "lazy organism," readers pay attention to the arguments only when source attribution is ambiguous. When confronted with a message backed up by an expert, they remember the source and the conclusion of the message. This explains why even physicians were persuaded by the leaflet and did not check its validity.

The source effect at work in the leaflet of Villejuif is not an exception. Most rumors rely on some kind of source effect. When they pass on a rumor, in order to enhance its credibility, people are prone to invent or to attribute hearsay to a close friend who knows some V.I.P. or reliable informant who confidentially told him some secret. Structurally this initial witness is granted the characteristics that make him an unquestionable source on the topic: health rumors mention a physician, crime rumors mention a policeman, a lawyer, or a judge. This is

clearly an attribution process in order to ensure belief. In oral rumors, this process is difficult to catch. Based on a leaflet, the Villejuif rumor offered a unique opportunity to observe this process of creation of an unquestionable credibility. The leaflet started with an anonymous identification (a hospital of Paris) and ended as "Information communicated by the Hospital of Villejuif."

Unlike most rumors, this one circulates on paper because of the quantity of information it has to convey. The poor layout of the leaflet, typed on ordinary typewriters, may actually have contributed to the leaflet's persuasiveness: such leaflets are the typical media of underground resistance. There is a flavor of "David versus Goliath" in the leaflet of Villejuif (Fine, 1985). It presents itself as a defense of people's health obliged to use the underground to reach its public against large and powerful corporations accused of selling poisonous brands to make a profit. Spreading, diffusing, and copying the leaflet is motivated by the desire to alert one's friends, colleagues, and relatives about a danger. The whole process is akin to a crusade.

The fuel of this crusade is found in the latent anxieties stimulated by the permanent advances of science and technology in all areas of life (Sapolsky, 1986) and especially in food. Food has always been a very sensitive area, prone to stimulate rumors; most modern urban legends deal with contamination fears (Brunvand, 1981, 1984).

Actually, the leaflet fights against the steady rise of industrial food (unsurprisingly, the leaflet was often found at the cash registers of macrobiotic food stores). But it also has a political facet, alleging some kind of plot against the people's health, with the passive cooperation of the administration. The leaflet denounces the large corporations, guilty of advertising unhealthy brands to children, and the indifference (if not collusion) of the French Food and Drug Administration. This political facet of the rumor partly explains its persuasiveness among teachers, on the whole rather leftist in France. In the case of the "rumor of Orléans," E. Morin (1969) already found that teachers were influenced by the rumor because of its underlying political facet.

In addition to these motivational factors, the leaflet's persuasiveness was facilitated by the ambiguity of the code names of the chemical food additives. Pioneer rumor researchers (Allport and Postman, 1947; Shibutani, 1966) pointed out that rumors develop when a stimulus is both important and ambiguous. Rumor is viewed as a process of collective deliberation to provide meaning to the ambiguous stimulus. Since then, research has shown that this rumor formula clearly does not explain all types of rumors (Rosnow, 1980; Kapferer, 1987). For instance, some rumors seem to emerge from scratch: one cannot find any event or fact which could have provoked word of mouth. The "vanish-

ing hitchhiker" (Brunvand, 1981) or the "rumor of Orléans (Morin, 1969) are typically such rumors. They are mostly phantasmatic and do not need any reality to burst out locally.

If the basic rumor formula certainly does not account for all types of rumors, it provides a model for understanding the leaflet of Villejuif. There is no doubt that cancer, poison, and food are extremely important and involving topics, especially if they concern one's children. It is significant that chemical food additives have been designated by codes whose meanings are ambiguous. As all codes, they suggest some need for secrecy, of maintaining their object far from the public's understanding, as if some danger were to be hidden.

THE ANTIRUMOR DIFFICULTIES

The success of the leaflet of Villejuif is also a result of the weakness of antirumor attempts. First, corporate policies made collective action impossible. Although the leaflet attacked the brands of the largest food companies operating in France, they did not unite to react. For instance, the Coca-Cola Corporation decided to stay mute for fear of seeing a more important question being raised: the case of sugar. What would have been easy to do, if done rapidly and forcefully by the pooling of financial resources, became too costly for the few corporations willing to attack the rumor.

Due to the absence of a common strategy, a low-profile approach was followed. Official sources were urged to release denials and reassuring communiqués. Indeed, the French Ministry of Health, the Villejuif Hospital, cancer specialists, and even consumer organizations all made unambiguous denials. But these denials rarely received significant consumer exposure. Typically the press would publish them once and consider any repetition unnecessary.

Formal police investigations were undertaken in an attempt to identify the source of the leaflet, with no result. After a few months, the process of leaflet diffusion had become autonomous.

When it was known that leaflets were being distributed at a specific place, lawsuits were undertaken, but the judiciary process was slow and lenient. Leaflet distributors claimed to have been fooled by the apparent credibility of the leaflet and the reference to the Villejuif Hospital. Judges were more severe about media publications of the leaflet: denials had to be clearly and openly published at their expense in the daily or magazine. Coming too late, in a dispersed and scattered way, these actions hardly deserve to be called antirumor actions. In practical terms this is equivalent to just waiting for the natural end of the rumor. Through time, consumer fears should diminish and the

leaflet's fear appeal lose its effectiveness. Certainly, the leaflet's diffusion pace is presently slower in France. But it is rapid in Italy, whose consumers have just started being poisoned—by the rumor.

In retrospect, the involved companies first followed a "do nothing" strategy and later on tried the "do something locally" and "do something discreetly" strategies. They refused to frontally attack the rumor by using all the media resources available. This attitude is widespread. F. Koenig (1985:167) also pointed out that "there appears to be a general, almost mystical reluctance on the part of some public relations people to confront a rumor problem directly. There seems to be a lurking fear that an open campaign will add fuel to the fire." If the rumor is a real problem, one cannot afford to wait until all else fails. Meanwhile, one leaves the monopoly of speech to the rumor. The silence of the involved companies made the leaflet of Villejuif all the more persuasive.

THE LEAFLET AS RUMOR

In this article, the leaflet of Villejuif was called a rumor. Since some may question whether this leaflet is a rumor, theoretical arguments are presented now, after the reader is acquainted with the account of the dissemination and acceptance of a proposition rejected by specialists and officials.

Classifying the leaflet of Villejuif as a rumor supposes an empirical definition of rumor. The French sociologist Edgar Morin (1969) defined "pure rumor" as topical information circulating in a social group, off media and largely unfounded. The leaflet meets these criteria: it is topical, concerning existing brands actually purchased by consumers; it circulates in specific segments of the population; its circulation was initially restricted to being passed from hand to hand—only later did it appear in the "small press," but still off media; it is disavowed by all cancer researchers and toxicologists.

The behavior and characteristics of the leaflet are those expected of any rumor (Rosnow and Fine, 1976). It has unknown origin. It makes use of an alleged unquestionable source. It polarizes the readers' attention on a few specific points (one additive, a few well-known brands). Finally, there is distortion since the real and official facts concerning the food additives have been either exaggerated or changed.

On the other hand, one classical evolution of oral rumor—sharpening—did not take place. Being couched on a leaflet, the full original message was always available and did not have to undergo the sharpening effects of selective forgetting and remembering.

However, the leaflet of Villejuif is not just any kind of rumor. Since the very first leaflet had to be typed by someone, it is a planted rumor,

which resulted in public disinformation. In modern terms, some would call it a planned disinformation by means of rumor (Lienhardt, 1975). Once the first leaflet was distributed, the spontaneous social dynamics of rumor have ensured its amazing nationwide diffusion. It is somewhat perplexing to see how, once planted, despite official denials, false information circulates and gains such a high degree of popular acceptance.

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