Rumor, Trust and Civil Society: Collective Memory and Cultures of Judgment

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Contemporary societies are awash in rumor. For better and worse, we live in an information surround in which there is simultaneously too much information and too little. Many wish to persuade us of truth claims, or, at the very least, to share them. These claims may have an uncertain provenance, but, under the right circumstances, we incorporate them into our belief system, act upon them, and recall them through collective memory.

Given these claims, the question becomes who, what, where and when do we trust. To the extent that reactions to assertions about society channel our actions, judgment is necessary, even if it is only implicit and tacit. The analysis of rumor belongs to the sociology of action. To produce a response, we must judge both those who communicate and what they communicate. As an everyday practice, we engage in the politics of credibility and the politics of plausibility. These concepts are tied to issues of public trust within civil society.

Of course, many types of claims are spread through society, and they differ on many dimensions. I address claims about the present, near future, and near past, and those that have an uncertain epistemological standing. In short, I examine rumor, defined as an expression of a belief of topical relevance that is spread without secure standards of evidence, given norms for beliefs. Both the issues of topical relevance and secure standards of evidence produce uncertain boundaries for what constitutes rumor. However, both phrases suggest that rumor has a broad political aspect, and in this analysis I discuss rumor as a form of political discourse. In its claims to be taken as plausible and relevant, it critiques the social order. The examination of rumor reaches the heart of what it means to have a public sphere, a space of common discourse in which a community collectively judges whether truth claims are to be accepted and responded to. As collective talk, rumor is tied to how society should be properly constituted. When solidified into firm belief, what once was a topical rumor

can enter into collective memory. Put another way, rumor is a form of mnemonic practice, a way of conceiving how the world is structured.

This assertion, linking rumor to the political, might seem expansive given that students of rumor have not attempted to connect their writings to collective memory, much less to political philosophy. Indeed, rumor and gossip are sometimes referred to as mental chewing gum (Rosnow and Fine, 1976). Much rumor research has focused on description, or, at best, made claims that rumor permits populations to address social concerns implicitly in ways that they could not do through explicit value discourse. By using claims of fact to express values, a speaker can achieve a measure of role distance (Goffman, 1961). Because the utterance purports to be true, the implicit beliefs do not *belong* to the speaker; s/he is only the reporter, animating the remark, but not vouching for it. Rather than presenting the belief that an ethnic or racial group is prone to criminal behavior, the rumor source can assert that some event occurred and some earlier speaker vouched for its accuracy. As a result, one hopes to be excused from bias, claiming that one is engaged in reportage.

Although this perspective appears cynical, it does not require that individuals be intentionally deceptive. In contrast, rumors are spread precisely because they support beliefs that make social sense: claims that are too good to be false. Typically, the speaker is either fully persuaded or at least believes that the account is sufficiently plausible to be worthy of notice. In the latter case, rumor may be phrased as a question, a desire to get others to corroborate it. In practice, rumors are often not passed on as declarative statements, but as interrogatives.

Falsity is not a defining characteristic of rumor. Rumors may either be true or false. The definition of rumor is agnostic as to accuracy. What characterizes rumor is the relationship of the text to social institutions, tied to the idea of what constitutes secured information. The phrase 'secured information', a somewhat odd locution, derived from concern with rumor in wartime. Allport and Postman (1947: 16), exploring rumor during the Second World War, worried about control over official information. Rumor was a means through which the public could evade institutional restraint, presumed necessary for military effectiveness then and now. Claims originating outside of formal channels of wartime information diffusion were defined by their absence of institutional support.

1. Rumors and the temporal cycle

Rumors are analogous to collective memory. Both make claims about how society is organized, both must be shared to gain standing in a belief system, and both play off state demands for control of citizen discourse. Of course, the concepts are not identical. First, different institutional specialists are involved. Collective memory is linked to history and historians as a form of *solidified* remembrance. Historians and other mnemonic specialists play a more fundamental role in establishing and preserving collective memory than for rumor, a genre that by being evanescent is harder to control. While both rumor and collective memories are matters that states attempt to direct, the more solidified collective memories are more easily controlled by government practices through the establishing of commemorative rituals.

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A second feature, temporal organization, also distinguishes the two categories. Collective memory is rumor served cold. Collective memory is about the past – a past filtered and shaped through the needs of the present. Rumor's temporal dynamics are more complex. Rumor makes a near-term claim: it can be about the recent past, the present, or the close future. Although one has to recall a rumor in order to transmit or act upon it, sedimented and institutional memories are rarely considered rumor. Rumor provides relevant knowledge that audiences can use here-and-now. As Tamotsu Shibutani (1966) asserts, rumor is improvised news – news that helps audiences cope with the ambiguities and strains of an uncertain present. Rumor reflects the future as filtered through the recent past.

2. The intersection of trust and rumor

For a society to survive and flourish, significant trust must knit a population together. Part of the value of trust stems from the need for predictability and part from a desire for moral clarity (Messick and Kramer, 2001). Put another way, trust results from a need to defend against uncertainty and vulnerability (Heimer, 2001). A social order with a trust deficit requires high levels of coercion and punishments to prevent breakdown.

Rumor both derives from and contributes to the social organization of trust. In one sense, rumor indicates a breakdown of institutional trust. The existence of rumor suggests that those who disseminate such claims argue – implicitly or explicitly – that information from authoritative sources is either incomplete or inaccurate. Either they are incompetent or immoral. Relevant information must be accessed by alternate means. This becomes salient when, as in the case of disasters (e.g. Hurricane Katrina), accurate information is essential but unavailable. Rumor may provide this information and assess why agencies responsible for providing it have failed.

At the same moment that rumor reveals uncertain trust in institutions and the quality of the information that they provide, it reveals trust in fellow citizens. Every functioning social system requires some basis of epistemic confidence. While questioning others does not imply that the responses *will be* accepted, but it suggests that the responses *might be* accepted. Rumor reveals trust in society at the moment that it questions trust in institutions.

Rumor implies a politics: sometimes in its content, striving for certain knowledge, and simultaneously revealing how social institutions are typified. In each case rumor proposes who and what should be trusted, allowing strategies of social action to be formulated. In this sense I refer to the politics of plausibility and to the politics of credibility. I separate the two concepts in that *claims* can be more or less plausible, deserving the investment of trust, whereas *persons* are judged to be more or less credible or trustworthy. In both cases these assessments are socially embedded.

Politics of plausibility

The politics of plausibility refers to choices that civic participants make in judging the truth claims embedded in rumor. As noted, rumor proposes knowledge about the recent, active past (x did y), the ongoing present (x is doing y), or the adjacent future (x will do y). These classes of rumor have different epistemological status. Past rumors rely on uncovering shrouded information, explanations for hidden events. Rumors exposing cover-ups are of this type. Present rumors provide real-time knowledge, the classic instance of Tamotsu Shibutani's improvised news. News in disaster and turmoil has this quality, as the goal is to shape plans for action. Unlike rumors of the past and future, present rumors often provoke a response. Future rumors return to the domain of concealment, but in this case it is hidden plans, already made, that need to be revealed to permit the future to be handled. In future rumors, narrators do not report events that have transpired, but claims are based upon an extrapolation from intentions to performance.

Each type of rumor requires plausibility. But what does this mean in practice? For rumor to work as communal knowledge, it must be treated as something that might reasonably happen in the world as we know it. A claim that is outside of the boundaries of our primary framework of experience (Goffman, 1974), our mundane reality, is likely to be framed as humor, put-on, teasing, deception or some other interpretive realm that does not make a claim for verisimilitude. This does not mean that rumor is considered to be accurate without question. We often accept stories about which we are not certain. Belief does not presume certainty (Degh, 2001), but we construct likelihood ratios for those claims with which we are confronted. Perhaps audiences do not accept stories that they know to be false, but often they will not inquire too closely about accounts that are 'too good to be false', claims that seem right within the context of other beliefs. Even when conceding the fallacy of a specific claim, audiences may affirm the larger truth that they see as standing behind the rumor.

Truth and falsity are often unknowable. As a consequence, if action is to be taken, audiences must select their proper level of belief. (Without an impetus for action, audiences can be agnostic.) Treating rumor content as unsecured, unverified or suspect reveals the dilemma of considering rumor as being either true or false. However, stating the dilemma in this fashion is misleading. While rumor is a term used both by social scientists and by the public, not every uncertain claim is so labeled. Rumor is a marker applied to information that a relevant actor considers suspect. Put another way, we do not believe 'rumors'. We believe rumors that we label as 'facts'.

As a result, a more appropriate question is who has the authority to describe a particular set of truth claims as valid or as dubious? Who has the right or the power to determine the legitimacy of a claim, not just in its accuracy but in whether it should be categorized as rumor. Such a focus involves asking when and how rumors are accepted as claims to be believed and spread. In a world with too much information, by what criteria do knowledge communities make distinctions?

The linkages among claims lead audiences to provisional acceptance and the possibility of further transmission. Put another way, rumors depend on other beliefs, texts and narratives for an assessment of their credibility. Texts, like people, are

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found in networks, and are judged in light of similar claims that have already been evaluated. A network of information allows for judgments of a new claim. Plausibility is embedded within knowledge regimes. What one institution considers impossible, another treats as plausible.

In our study of rumors in white and African-American communities, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America*, Patricia Turner and I argued that blacks and whites have distinctively dissimilar racialized pools of knowledge. We suggested that the evaluation of texts is linked to racial politics. Those beliefs that were embedded in black communities were likely to differ from those found among mainstream white audiences – at least as far as racial matters were concerned. It was not only that blacks and whites had different standards for judging plausibility, but that previous beliefs on which new texts were judged differed. The references for belief varied, and so plausibility varied as well. Many blacks accepted the possibility of racial genocide through accepting a set of knowledge claims concerning the Tuskegee syphilis experiment – the study during the mid-20th century in which black men were studied as their syphilis progressed, even after the possibility of cure. For whites, these claims are far less salient and are judged far less relevant to current policies.

Evaluating plausibility is not merely assessed by individuals, but is linked to interaction contexts and social systems. Plausibility is tied to communities and collective judgments, a point to which I return.

The politics of credibility

In practice, information is variably linked to its source, as the circumstances of communication affect the extent to which informant credibility is judged to be crucial. However, in most times and places one evaluates the narrator, while one also evaluates what is narrated. Narrators often discover that they are married to their narrations. Admittedly on some occasions – such as in the immediate aftermath of disaster or in times of political upheaval – demands for knowledge swamp the characteristics or the character of a narrator, but these are exceptional moments. The politics of credibility connects to the evaluation that audiences make of the source of the material: whether to award credibility and whether reference to one's source is incorporated in the text as it is transmitted, gainsaying its believability. Credibility becomes a product of interaction regimes and of institutional position. In other words, speakers perform credibility, either through impression management or through the status markers that derive from social position. Positional credibility is readily appreciated as status directly adheres to the speaker, even recognizing that different audiences have varying perspectives on institutional status. In contrast, interactional credibility must be negotiated by the speaker through self-presentation.

In most circumstances people rarely knowingly transmit false information, but they can avoid knowing if a claim is false if they choose. As people are often linked to the information they spread, they attempt to avoid the label of liar, deceiver or fool. When uncertain information is being transmitted, the communicator may place distance between self and story.

A narrator with a reputation as trustworthy and as candid finds that this public

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self rubs off on the presented truth claims. This individual can become an oracle or repository of communal knowledge. The position of the narrator affects how information is judged. Certain individuals by virtue of their location within an information network are expected to have legitimate access to facts, becoming 'honest brokers' in reportage. The awarding of authoritative standing is linked to our perception of the speaker's familiarity with the facts of the case and to our assumption of his or her willingness to provide that truth with disinterest.

Audiences typically give great weight to truth claims from individuals who are defined as being credible sources by virtue of being in a position to know. Government spokespersons are often granted this assumption of closeness, particularly with regard to statements of fact, as opposed to claims of motivation. For instance, it is legitimate to question or doubt the president's press secretary in describing *why* the president acted, whereas it would be odd to question *whether* the president acted. While spokespersons sometimes deceive about actions, this deception directly undercuts the trust on which democracies depend. The press secretary has the authority to know by virtue of placement in an information network. In a functioning system these people are credible reporters, and audiences often treat this information as fact, releasing it from the demands for personal evaluation. In contrast, motivations can be altered or hidden, linked to strategies of impression management, and these claims are recognized as being more problematic. Deceptions are expected in such cases.

Audiences routinely decide whether a speaker is likely to have acquired information from trustworthy sources, and then decide whether they will accept or act on the information. A narrator's assertions of having heard information from the media or from one's friends, often a salient part of truth claims, are strategies to bolster trustworthiness, given one's remove from the reported events. Personal gossip may carry greater weight than claims from friends about the larger social world. Narrators are deemed more likely to know about their own personal lifeworld than about the institutional order. Acquaintanceship or weak ties prove very important in rumor diffusion in that the audience may assume that these individuals are pure in motive, and, further, being outside of one's immediate network, may have wider sources of information (Granovetter, 1973). Word-of-mouth or viral marketing trades on this belief, harnessing the credibility of a close circle of friends for instrumental ends. Further, these individuals filter out extraneous information in conditions of information overload, distributing information that their audiences desire (Gladwell, 2000).

Along with distance from events, audiences judge motives for spreading information. Is the source disinterested? We reside on the rocky shoals of potential deceit. When we impute motives to a speaker, we open the possibility of a challenge to the plausibility of the text through questioning credibility.

Motive is the worm in the apple of belief. Does the narrator have a reason to deceive or to shade information? The attributed motivation of a speaker influences how audiences interpret a text. This connects to what the philosopher J. L. Austin (1975) speaks of as the illocutionary force of an utterance. What is a person attempting to do in making a claim? What kind of statement is it by virtue of likely motivation? Recognizing these questions, speakers often attempt to channel the

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assumptions of their audiences by presenting *motive talk*, providing their own appraisals of their motivation (Mills, 1940; Scott and Lyman, 1968).

Audience judgments of motivation relate to *interest* and *history*. Audiences are predisposed to accept the claims made by others, unless compelling reasons suggest caution. In considering the credibility of the speaker we are likely to ask whether there is something to gain or hide, and whether the person has provided poor information in the past. Political commentators, lovers and parents know that they must interpret with care the claims of those who attempt to persuade them. Self-interest may shape the story. In some cases, the narrator does not have much invested in our belief, and the stories are told from a desire to amuse or to test an uncertain claim. In these cases, doubt as to the plausibility of the claim can be entertained without smudging the credibility of the speaker.

The importance of narrator reputation is well-known to those authoritative spokespersons, swains and children who, in presenting information that is once deemed false, find that their later utterances are questioned. Deceptiveness can become embedded within a reputation. Each text affects the response to those texts that come after: it shapes narrator credibility. Those with reputations as malicious gossips or rumormongers discover that their later statements are discredited.

Both plausibility and credibility are situated within the politics of everyday life. Even if rumor seems a personal matter of diffusion and response, these judgments are tied to the forms of trust that are integral to the organization of a social system. While rumors may be plausible without credibility, or derive from credible sources without much in the way of plausibility, for rumors to enter public discourse both are essential.

3. Cultures of judgments

Rumors are both spread and judged within communities. Information and its evaluation are socially located, not merely the result of individual decisions. Although rumor researchers have focused on the characteristics of audiences and on their critical ability to judge rumor, such approaches needlessly downplay how communal judgments create shared response. Rumors are evaluated within cultures of judgment. This is analogous to the distinction between personal memory and collective memory. While one can hardly ignore that memories belong to individuals, they are shaped and become useful when they transcend the self. In this, rumor is part of the Durkheimian framework that brackets the individual actor, treating collective representations as determining action. These communities operate both on the level of interaction – the group and network – and through analytically separate processes of institutionalization, in which belief systems are more than a collection of selves.

The audience of a claim must determine whether it should award trust. While individuals rely upon personal assessments, this is an uncertain process as few individuals are in the position to judge truth for themselves, although they do accept working hypotheses. As Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) emphasizes, cognition is a social phenomenon. What we believe has much to do with where in the interaction order we reside: what groups and social networks shape our experience. We judge texts

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and persons based on the standards for such judgment that are shared with those around us, and thus we reside in communities of judgment. Social systems depend upon such communities for stability and continuity. These communities provide the basis on which we embrace the decision-making of others as legitimate, giving up our autonomy to those on whose word we can count.

The idea and the reality of the community of judgment permit rumor to be translated into trust or to forswear that trust. The community mediates rumor and trust in society. And, as I now discuss, this social engagement influences the amount and vibrancy of rumor in a community.

4. Trust and rumor intensity

The extent of rumor diffusion within a social system is variable, but what produces such differences and how is this linked to the presence or absence of social trust? While I will describe several critical dimensions, a well-functioning civil society requires a moderate level of rumor, both in frequency and spread. Up to a point rumor bolsters the social order. Societies characterized by distrust and those characterized by fear or apathetic acceptance are likely to have more and less rumor than those with an active public sphere. For purposes of this analysis, I address five dimensions through which patterns of rumor can be distinguished: frequency, diffusion, boundary, divisiveness and stability. Each reflects the form that trust takes as revealed through the distribution of unsecured communication. I do not examine particular rumors, but rather assess the general properties of rumor. Further, I make these claims based upon a theoretical analysis grounded in a consideration of trust, but each of these claims must be tested, challenging as that might be.

Frequency

A first question that arises about rumor flow is how much rumor is there. One can either ask about the number of distinct rumors that are spread or the amount of rumor transmission (many rumors versus a few rumors spread widely). In general, the existence of rumor reveals uncertain confidence in information adequacy. In cases where information is not crucial, rumor is a form of entertainment, but when information is suppressed, knowledge claims become a form of resistance.

A society in which much rumor spreads (particularly those dealing with social issues) has likely experienced institutional breakdown: either institutions are not communicating or are believed not to be providing accurate, fair or necessary information. Authoritarian states are the classic instance in which rumor frequency has been linked to system breakdown (e.g. Bauer and Gleicher, 1953). In these cases, the public does not trust official information. Informal communication channels provide alternative knowledge streams around these manipulative sources. While the state might attempt to suppress oppositional sources of public knowledge, controlling them is difficult. State workers have personal ties to others and may share honest but extra-official claims. While democratic states with traditions of free speech easily per-

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mit rumor diffusion, these rumors may be less robust and consequential than those found in states in which the government forcefully attempts to direct what citizens have a right to know. An authoritarian system justifies the spread of rumor, serving as counter-hegemonic political discourse or as the basis for revolutionary change.

The extreme version of this state system is totalitarianism, differing from authoritarianism by virtue of ongoing surveillance and political control over citizens' life-worlds. The cases of Nazi Germany (in contrast to Fascist Italy) or Stalinist Russia during the purges (in contrast to Communist Hungary) exemplify these systems. In such a regime, speakers and audiences can be punished for participating in alternative knowledge systems. Because of the importance of the communication, rumor will continue to spread, but its frequency (as well as its locations) might be dampened because the state steadily increases the costs of rumoring through forms of social control. It is an empirical question as to how repression decreases rumor (or shifts its location), although surely such research would be difficult in the extreme. In this case the information embedded in rumor becomes more valuable, especially as it becomes more scarce. Trust in the system, tied to internalization of official values and identification with authority, is replaced by pressured conformity (Kelman, 1973). In repressive settings the speaker must trust the audience not to reveal its source.

With regard to rumors with political implications, more rumors should be found in systems lacking in institutional trust, provided transaction costs are not too high. In turn, the existence of competing claims and explanations – presenting alternative truth realms – should decrease the amount of trust that citizens give to the system. Thus, the amount of political rumor and trust in a system operates in a recursive fashion.

Diffusion

Distinct from rumor frequency is the spread of rumor. In considering spread, two dimensions are relevant: the speed and the extent of diffusion. A rumor can spread very quickly, but may only reach a corner of the society, or, in contrast, a rumor may spread steadily but slowly. In considering patterns of diffusion, understanding communicative technologies is crucial. Much has been written (Donovan, 2004; Fine and Turner, 2001) about the role of the internet in changing patterns of information diffusion. A similar analysis applies to other technologies, such as telephone, television, print media or telegraph. Technology shapes transmission patterns, creating a geography of communication. Beyond the primary patterns of diffusion second-order diffusion (including word-of-mouth) is possible as rumor can jump technological boundaries.

Technologies have temporal consequences. Those who examine rumor in cyberspace note that because of the low cost of diffusion, rumor can spread rapidly and then, in the face of contradiction or doubt, can collapse. Internet communication represents an archetypal example of minimal trust invested in particular diffusers. The internet is sometimes scorned as an information bazaar that institutionalizes a philosophy of *caveat emptor*.

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Other technologies, including word-of-mouth, have different patterns of diffusion, and are trusted in different ways. Information systems are organized in light of the political structure of the social system in which they are embedded. Openness and cost of participation differentiate technologies, along with the possibility of surveillance, a feature that affects the extent to which citizens trust the security of private or counter-institutional claims.

Information technologies operate at different speed and with different ranges. Contrasting mass media with face-to-face communication reveals distinctively different patterns. Electronic media rapidly communicate (and retract) information reaching diverse populations, whereas direct interpersonal communication depends on lengthy strands of contacts. Rumor that spreads through word-of-mouth typically has a longer lag time between the point of origin of the rumor and when diffusion slows; decay is slower as well. Each media has a potential audience that shapes the final extent of diffusion, as some technologies do not reach all populations.

Trust may differ in these conditions. Face-to-face communication depends on the local negotiation of trust where the audience can make an informed and immediate judgment of the amount of trust to award. By contrast, in mediated communication the previously established reputation of the source becomes the basis for trust, less subject to negotiation.

Boundaries

Related to diffusion are the boundaries of information preserves. Imagine two societies in which a rumor reaches half the population. In one the communication is random, a function of who on a given evening happened to be listening to a radio station popular among all citizens. In the second society, radio listening is linked to gender. All women hear the rumor, but no men do. While the extent of diffusion (and perhaps its speed) are identical, the dynamics of rumor differ greatly. In the second case, what appears to be a single society turns out to be – in informational terms – two non-intersecting societies sharing a geographical area.

The most dramatic instance of the power of boundaries involves race in the United States and elsewhere. Black and white Americans are said to have distinctive, racialized pools of knowledge (Fine and Turner, 2001; Maines, 1999). This suggests that the two groups are unaware of the beliefs that the other group holds. The more dominant group is particularly liable to be unaware of the knowledge claims of their subalterns, having little direct access to the community and perhaps feeling no reason to be concerned about their beliefs. Rumors in the white community tend to be better known, if only because white-dominated media are more accessible.

African-American rumors, tied to local assumptions of how society operates, often suggest the presence of a broad institutional conspiracy. A notable example is the belief in 'The Plan' (Turner, 1993), a claim that white elites systematically discredit or murder any black leader who effectively articulates the grievances of the community. The belief that the HIV virus was developed in a government laboratory as a form of biological warfare has a similar dynamic.

Rumors in white communities have different content. These rumors typically sug-

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gest that blacks – individuals or small groups – have committed or are planning some horrific crime. The rumors about cannibalism in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have this form, so did claims that in order to be initiated black gang members had to rape blonde virgins. Unlike rumors in the African-American community, these rumors do not assume systematic structural malice, but they presume that idiosyncratic events are characteristic ones. They assume moral depravity, rather than structural malevolence.

When differences in beliefs are discovered, the casual assumption of similarity and the underlying trust that comes from this assumption are shaken. White Americans often assert privately that African-Americans are paranoid in their fears of a continuing policy of racial animus or genocide, whereas blacks assert that the rumors that are found in white communities reveal covert racism. The willingness to accept rumors that others dismiss is grounded on the politics of plausibility, tied to knowledge of historical circumstance. Within their communities, rumors represent the updating of collective memory. As these rumors are solidified, collective memory is strengthened.

The default belief is that all people have the same understandings. To be sure, the existence of stories that depict wickedness reveal that equality is not assumed, but at least it is assumed that all citizens share knowledge. When that assumption is abrogated, trust in the equality of social participation is challenged. Societies in which informational boundaries are most evident are those that must confront social trust most explicitly.

Divisiveness

The content of rumor is closely linked to social boundaries. Does the content bind groups together in common cause or does the content underline group conflict? Early rumor research (Knapp, 1944) distinguished among fear-based rumors, wish-fulfillment rumors and wedge-driving rumors, the latter a salient category in times of war and ethnic strain. Divisive rumors fall into this last category, creating the boundaries that then establish informational divides.

Rumors can separate people and groups either demographically or institutionally. They have the potential to create suspicion and a breakdown of trust. The 'Lights Out' rumor of the early 1990s claimed that African-American gang members would drive without turning on their headlights and when courteous (white) drivers flashed a warning, these Samaritans would be murdered. This claim spawned mistrust towards young black male drivers, at least temporarily. Similarly, rumors among women about attacks by male sexual predators divide men and women.

Divisive rumors also undercut social trust in authorities. As Véronique Campion-Vincent (2005) argues, the public increasingly accepts rumors that purport to reveal elite conspiracies. Suspicions of outsider groups are now joined by mistrust of central institutions. While this is not an entirely new phenomenon (suspicions of bankers or politicians have a lengthy pedigree), such claims have become more mainstream over the past several decades. As a result, it is now common to find rumors that doubt official, institutional truth and give more weight to unsecured

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knowledge. Many rumors include critiques of social policy (O'Neill, 1994). Rumors that assert that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is targeting dissidents or that the Federal Communications Commission is planning to ban religious programming take policy disputes and transform them into questions about the legitimacy of the social system. Rumors within African-American communities that suggest that authorities deliberately target people of color not only reveal the boundaries of diffusion, but also remind us that worldviews can be divisive.

Plausibility judgments not only cause, but are embedded in pre-existing social divisions. Demographic and institutional malaise breed rumor. In societies in which mistrust exists about the actions of demographic groups or political institutions, rumors are easier to start, seem more plausible, and can enter into collective memory as reflecting the divided lifeworlds of citizens.

Stability

The final category relevant to the relationship between trust and rumor is that of information stability. Rumors vary in their alteration over time. Stability has long been a topic in rumor studies. Early studies from Allport and Postman (1947), relying on Bartlett (1932), examined the dynamics of memory. How does the content of rumor change as a function of processes of forgetting (leveling), emphasis (sharpening) and cognitive consistency (assimilation). The dynamics of rumor is likened to the game of telephone in which children whisper a phrase through a chain of participants. What is reported at the end bears little resemblance to the original text. The recognition that information can be garbled is a source of great amusement. In practice, rumor does not change as wildly as misheard phrases in a children's game, but the idea that communication can be systematically distorted is central to rumor analysis.

While it is generally assumed that rumor texts become truncated as they are transmitted (as in laboratory simulations of real-world rumor chains), some evidence exists (Peterson and Gist, 1951; Rosnow and Fine, 1976) that under the right circumstances elaboration occurs. When narration is status-enhancing and when audiences plead for more information, imaginative details may be woven into an embellished account.

Stability can be conceptualized either as temporal stability or as content stability. The first addresses whether the same rumors will be recalled over time or whether they will fade from memory, becoming latent, perhaps with the possibility of re-emerging subsequently. Content stability refers to whether details are altered within a rumor that remains part of social discourse. Instances of temporal instability are easily recognizable when one examines a set of rumors collected previously. Many will have been forgotten or are no longer actively spread. Content instability is evident when the targets of rumors change (e.g. Jews to Asians, K-Mart to Wal-Mart, or Phil Donahue to Oprah).

Stability is linked to the dynamics of trust in that unstable rumors suggest a society pressured by social change. Stability may, however, be taken in two ways. First, a lack of stability may suggest a society that is open to change, incorporating

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new content, processing new fears. In contrast, a lack of stability may indicate that those new fears threaten to overwhelm social boundaries. Rumor scholars have not been effective in devising techniques to test these hypotheses, in part because of the difficulty of gathering rumor texts systematically; but until these methodological strategies are developed, rumor research will be little more than insightful hunches and informed guesswork.

5. Rumor and trust

Rumors are an integral part of civil society, and, to a degree, they help promote social stability. I argue that the extent of rumor constitutes an inverted U-shaped curve in which a moderate number of rumors suggests social participation, investment in collective order and social trust, while rumor as dominant discourse or as nearly absent suggests either mistrust or apathy (or fear). Rumor builds collective memory, and depends on those memories, suggesting the presence of a recognized group with shared values and concerns – a community of judgment. This community of judgment is at the heart of a well-functioning public sphere.

To imagine a political community that lacks rumor is to envisage an apathetic world. The public in this fantasized world makes no effort after meaning (Allport and Postman, 1947). News need not be improvised because it is either unquestioned or unnecessary. Too much trust permits anything to be done without questioning; the contentious debates that characterize democratic polities are not to be found.

In contrast, a world in which rumor dominates political discourse is a world that is breaking down. Institutional trust has vanished, and suspicion greets any assertion as audiences search for hidden interests that oppose their own notions of the public good. Groups doubt that authorities have their welfare at heart, and they search for subtexts in a harsh conspiratorial world. All information is up-for-grabs in epistemological combat, and reputational battles must run their course. Streams of collective memory only rarely merge into shared consensus.

Rumor matters in shaping trust, and, in turn, trust matters in shaping the contours of rumor. The proper balance – questioning without distrusting – creates the basis for a productive public sphere. Rumor and trust, when in balance, provide the conditions for civil society to flourish.

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