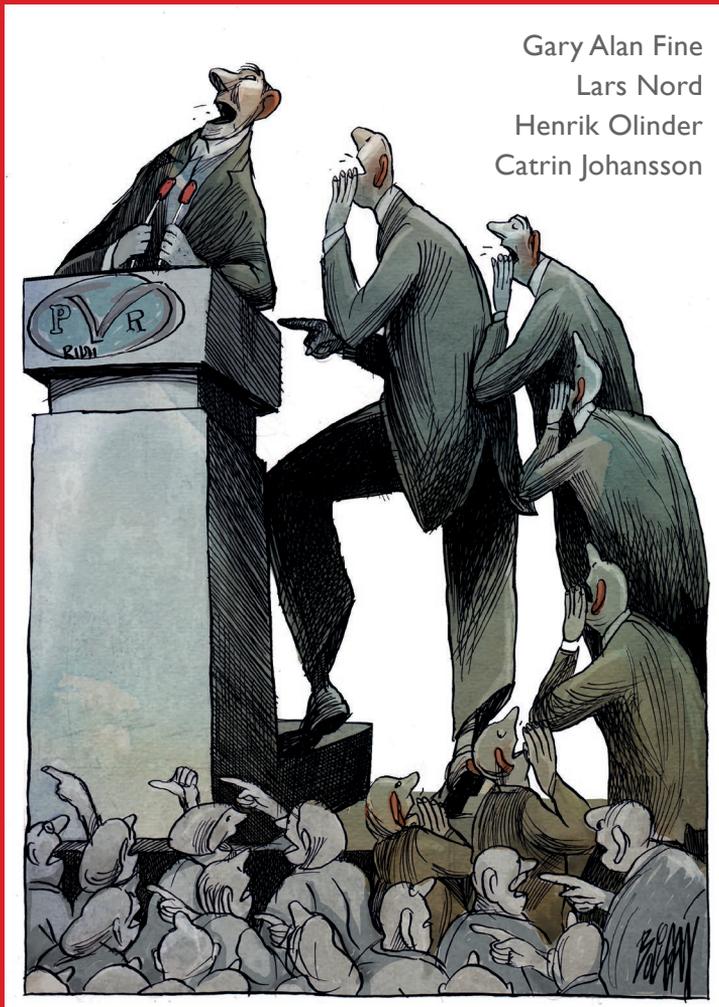


# RUMORS ON THE AGENDA



– MANAGING PUBLIC CONCERN  
THROUGH CRISIS COMMUNICATION



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Rumors on the agenda

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# PREFACE

This book originated out of our concern that there is insufficient knowledge about rumors that affect crisis communication. We need more certainty on how to act when rumors and concerns arise. Our broader concern is consideration of how anxiety shapes the motivation for the spread of rumor, its acceptance, and how government agencies might contribute to moderate public anxiety.

This book is the result of a project that aimed to improve organizations' crisis management and to change their crisis communication in connection with crises. To our knowledge, this is the first book on rumors and crisis communication that includes the mechanisms and phenomena behind rumors that can affect how crisis communication is designed during a crisis. This work is based on relevant research and scientifically proven methods.

Our main audience is students studying media and communication science at colleges and universities; professional journalists; and crisis managers and communication professionals in organizations, authorities, and municipalities. The overall purpose of this book is to increase students' and professionals' knowledge of and approach to rumors during concerns and crises. This publication can be used in courses on crisis communication, as well as in practice when planning and preparing for practical crisis communication work. It benefits several different actors in organizations from small to large municipalities/regions as well as all authorities and politicians. Because most actors ask for working methods in the area, there are opportunities to implement the results for practical use. The idea is that each actor, independently and in collaboration with others, should be able to benefit from the methods.

There are four parts to this book. The first part reviews various phenomena and mechanisms that can be the causes of the spreading of rumors and public concern. We also discuss the difference between rumors, misleading information, and disinformation. The second part focuses on how crisis communication is affected by rumor spreading and how rumors can be managed during crises. This part is based on research but also contains practical cases. The third part is built around different scenarios, and provides recommendations and advice based

on scientific research and scientifically proven methods. Finally, the fourth part includes four scenarios that can be useful for training.

Due to the sad loss of Professor Lars Nord in August 2024, Catrin Johansson was invited to contribute to finish his work in part 2 on rumors and crisis communication.

We hope that the insights and experiences of rumors and crisis communication in this publication will be used by students as well as crisis managers and communication professionals. The content provides research-based knowledge as guidance for decision-makers tasked with crisis communication.

*Gary, Henrik, Catrin, and Lars*

Evanston, Stockholm, and Sundsvall, May 21, 2025

# RUMORS AND PUBLIC CONCERN

**T**ruth matters, trust is essential, anxiety clouds minds, and citizens demand protection. The last is the most significant of all. If nothing else, we expect our government to protect us from those harms that we cannot control. Sometimes, this desire for protection leads to policies that require or restrict action. Other times, and here we approach the world of rumor, this desire for security involves having authorities inform the public how we can act in what we believe to be our best interest.

This sharing of information as a form of mutual protection is our topic of interest, an especially crucial topic in a world that seems to be overflowing with uncertain predictions, technical knowledge, and competing claims that are hard to judge. When we realize, sadly all too frequently, that there are those who provide disinformation or fake news, our concern is deep and may, at times, feel overwhelming. In contrast, to survive and thrive, citizens require access to what we term “secure information.” We focus on how this comes about and what are the threats to accepting this information. We ask the following: What forms of crisis communication are most effective, and how do these protect citizens from the “worst-case” scenarios of the challenges that they confront? Our hope is that by the end of this volume, you will understand how rumors reflect beliefs, trust, and public concern. Through a set of case studies—hypothetical but based on real events—we will demonstrate the role of rumor as well as crisis communication, and how these two are linked.

To understand the challenge of effective communicating in a crisis, we present a set of valuable concepts. We begin with the recognition of public concern as a driving force that shapes the interpretation of the world that surrounds us. In emphasizing the role of social concern, we are not referring to the presence of individual psychological strains,

much less personal pathologies. This book is not devoted to counseling, therapy, or psychoanalysis. Rather, we address public concern that is shared and part of the civic sphere: These collective feelings are part of beliefs and narratives about societal troubles, especially, although not exclusively, those that have some immediate consequences. People take symbolic themes that make intuitive sense and apply these themes to the immediate dangers that confront us.

Public concern arises in most crises but usually subsides after the immediate danger has passed. A problematic issue for those who have the responsibility to provide crisis communication is that authorities have considerable difficulties assessing both the impact of public concern and its consequences.

Why do we not always communicate in the way that research and experience demand and recommend? Public concern is not inevitably negative; a moderate amount of anxiety can lead to heightened awareness. Moreover, with successful coping, communities are able to deal with anxiety collaboratively, which makes it largely solution oriented and not counterproductive. Those authorities who are most concerned about anxiety tend to imagine individuals who may suffer from psychic stresses, leading to dysfunction, but public concern need not have this negative dimension. In these more productive cases, authorities become their own worst enemies as their actions may create greater anxiety, rather than reducing these feelings.

As a means of approaching the dynamics of collective anxiety, we focus on rumors, so often evident when the world is uncertain and, consequently, frightening. These claims are shared. Despite the negative implications often assigned to them as being false or malicious, uncertain information sometimes turns out to be accurate. These claims are often found to be credible, depending on their content and source, but on other occasions they can be deeply misleading. By emphasizing their uncertain status, we separate rumor from both truth and lies. We recognize that there are many examples in each category. As a result, we might suggest that we reside in a fishbowl of facts. This is a world of promiscuous claims, too many to easily judge their morality without a suitable, trustworthy, authoritative guide. Without this guide, we are left asking which claims are we to believe? Which promoters are we to trust? Can we depend on our social relations—our friends, neighbors, and family—to discern what otherwise appears to be hazy truth? These are the standard questions that scholars of rumor, conspiracy, and belief



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routinely strive to answer. Fake news, mischievous assertions, and bogus claims have long troubled communities and, as a result, these questions are proper, even essential. Perhaps they are even more so today, thanks to a gushing faucet of claims from social media. Any account of rumor must confront these issues.

Beyond these broad concerns, a book such as ours must confront another set of questions: How do public concern and rumor operate in the contemporary media environment and what insight can we provide as to how rumor is likely to evolve in the future? As communication technology continues to change, will judgements of truth and “truth tellers” also change? Do authorities still matter and how can their voices be worthy of trust? What indicators suggest that we should trust those who claim to provide protective claims, judging assertions that others (politicians, scientists, journalists, and influencers) are lying, misleading, or dissembling. As the American political theorist Cass Sunstein (2009) points out, such predictions are dangerous, no matter how sincere the intention. Perhaps we might even suggest that forecasts for the future should be treated as a genre of fiction. Who could have predicted the range of global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic—a Zero Covid policy in China, global isolation in New Zealand, contentious local responses in the United States, and a more relaxed atmosphere in Sweden? These responses included restructuring workplaces, schoolrooms, and travel policies. For some, the anxiety has ebbed, but for others it remains powerful as is true in other circumstances. Still, public concern of the possibility of unavoidable and unpredictable

Fake news, mischievous assertions, and bogus claims have long troubled communities, and, as a result, these are proper, even essential, questions.

death, coupled with the rumors and beliefs that are being shared about the virus are traditional with recognizable parallels to those of viruses past, as the folklorist Andrea Kitta (2019) demonstrates in her book, *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore*. We can recognize that many similarities exist between rumors about COVID-19 and the earlier SARS pandemic, a point persuasively demonstrated from before the pandemic by Jon Lee (2014) in his account,

*An Epidemic of Rumors: How Stories Shape Our Perceptions of Disease*.

However, as important as the COVID-19 pandemic has been, and how central it has been to the examination of how anxiety is linked to widely spread information, our book is not solely focused on rumors

that address COVID-19, even if we recognize that rumors are often considered to be viral communication! We do discuss these rumors, but our broader concern is consideration of how anxiety shapes the motivation for the spread of rumor, its acceptance, and how government agencies might contribute to the moderation of public nerves.

Central to the justification for this book is the consideration of what changes in the information environment and technological techniques of diffusion suggest about how public concern plays out and what the implications are for the spread, persistence, and prominence of rumor and other unofficial claims. With the information bazaar on cable television and the bizarre information on websites, awareness of truth claims—whether or not they are accurate—about global events has increased exponentially. This allows for a greater feeling of public dislocation and worry, a problem that applies to individuals and, as we emphasize, communities. The existence of diverse and different media outlets reminds us of a hazy line between information and entertainment. What communities choose to believe and what they feel “makes sense” given their expectations are not necessarily the best basis on which to make decisions. In all of life’s domains—whether entertaining or frightening—we assess claims by judging both the content and the communicator. If we become aware of our own biases and anxieties, citizens will be able to make more informed judgments and authorities will be able to provide accurate, or at least plausible, information that bolsters public confidence.

Rumors that deal with matters of public concern operate in a field of anxiety, but why? The answer is in our quite reasonable desire for security. Put another way, we need certainty in an uncertain world. Repeatedly, people—non-experts without access to in-depth knowledge—must cope with uncertain knowledge, no matter how much certainty others award it. We transform suspicion to confidence, but sometimes this is not warranted, as is evident in the wealth of conspiracy stories.

Such is the nature of belief: Communities tend to commit to one version of the world that is consensual, and then use that vision as the basis of action. This demands that when we hope to calm people’s fears at moments of crisis, authorities must produce messages that are framed in light of the public’s accepted beliefs and that recognize the reputations of those who are communicating. Even if an agency is filled with entirely sincere individuals who have public welfare at heart—as many

do—they must recognize the occasionally profound mistrust toward their agency that must be considered. In this regard, rumor should be treated as a domain of knowledge that is tightly linked to the relations between the communicator and the audience, as well as the relations within that audience.

Throughout this book, we emphasize that the appreciation of rumor depends on the *politics of plausibility and the politics of credibility*. These strategies of judgment have evolved in an age in which we have wide access to claims about the world through websites, discussion boards, and social media, as well as through more traditional face-to-face communication and mass media. The mere fact that information is widely available does not make it any more certain, any more true, or, for that matter, any more false. While the public desires to discover secure truth, the reality is that we often must live with ambiguity. We must become aware of what might be termed the boundary of truth, ignorance's domain, what scholars call agnotology: the study of ignorance, of not knowing (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008). At this boundary, we find the uncertainty of knowledge, a domain in which rumor thrives. While uncertain knowledge may be deliberately constructed by organizations that hope to mislead, oftentimes rumors may also arise from misunderstandings or best guesses that are taken as reality. However, there is something more than this; it involves the importance of the situation as it is perceived, and, as a result, these choices of what to believe are linked to the need to know—and this leads to the shared anxieties mentioned above.

When a community lacks direct knowledge of a situation that affects their welfare, citizens are often challenged to judge the claims that swirl about. While it might be optimistic to assume that people focus on what government agencies devoted to crisis communication provide, this information does not always dominate. In contrast, people depend on their social relations and evaluations of those to whom they are connected through their social networks. It is easy to understand why this should be as these relations reflect a considerable measure of trust that has been built up over time. It is not easy to deny the claim of a friend or family member, so people are often reluctant to question or argue with their friends and neighbors.

While a similar process of evaluation occurs with the judgment of all kinds of information, it is particularly salient when considering unofficial claims that have the potential to affect one's immediate welfare. This is



## Defining rumor

Perhaps we have stepped ahead of ourselves. Before we proceed, we need a definition of rumor, the central concept of this book. What is rumor? How can we separate it from forms of more secure and more trustworthy communication? If one asks average citizens to define rumor, they often report that a rumor is a claim that is false, inaccurate, or misleading, deliberately or not. They might even suggest that a rumor is equivalent to a lie. In this view, rumor is a form of “fake news” or “disinformation”: claims by those who are not designated as trustworthy experts by those who have the power to determine who is “in” and “out.” The designation of expertise is crucial in determining whether a rumor can be taken as fact. When we assert that the source knows better, the claims are often designated as a “lie,” used to deceive for a malign purpose. Fake news and disinformation presume an awareness of truth and a conscious desire to mislead.

In other words, in much common usage, rumor has a negative valence. This is evident when people dismiss a claim by saying that it is “only rumor,” distancing it from truth. However, most researchers who have examined rumor embrace a more sophisticated definition. By itself, rumor is neither inherently true nor always false. In contrast, rumor refers to claims made by sources who do not have access to what are described as “secure standards of evidence.” As noted by sociologist Chandra Mukerji (1977), certain individuals, due to their social relations or organizational positions, are awarded the “authority to know.” They are treated as experts. However, even this perspective raises questions. Who is counted as an expert? What knowledge do they need to have? Who awards them the status of truth-teller? Controversial as it may be, we require some sources to whom we award the mantle of expertise. When we lack such individuals, rumor cannot be distinguished from truth; all claims that we cannot judge personally are the same and all are equally believable, even if some eventually prove to be egregiously wrong. The central characteristic of rumor is its uncertainty, but the need to verify is crucial to create a body of knowledge on which we can act, even if sometimes we are misled and even if experts do not agree or always deserve that honorific. As the American president Ronald Reagan put it, we need to “trust but verify.”

## Rumor, public concern, and the search for truth

The complexities of modern life, coupled with the expanded reach of the media, both mass and digital, find contemporary societies awash in “news,” often produced by those who desire to influence the world. Perhaps ironically, we reside in a world in which there is simultaneously too much information and too little. Many groups present the truth “in their opinion” to convince us to see the world through their eyes or, perhaps better said, to see the world through their facts. These claims frequently have an uncertain provenance: When we doubt their claims, they may be labeled “rumors” or “urban legends” or even, as noted above, should we be suspicious or unkind, as “lies.” When these claims harmonize with our desires, past beliefs, and assessment of the morality of their proponent, we accept them, act upon them, and share them with others. In sharing, we demonstrate that we belong to a community of talk. The concept of community is important in recognizing that we do not judge as individuals, but through a shared world. This is important as society is inevitably based on a network, and effective crisis management requires the existence of shared commitments to a healthy civil society. While people must have some level of trust in the content of what they communicate, sharing rumors is a straightforward way of participating in social groups on the local, national, or even global level.

In a world in which shadowy conspiracies are possible and, for some, probable, even seemingly definitive facts from well-regarded sources may be insufficient. This does not mean that there is no truth available, but simply that facts are not orphans and must have sponsors to introduce them into “polite society.” Following the lead of Howard Becker (1963), we speak of these individuals as constituting moral entrepreneurs. Within the realm of rumor scholarship, many scholars search for truth (Sunstein, 2009). This is a noble goal. People wish to believe that the world is clearly knowable; life would be too frightening if this belief were absent. We must be able to feel comfortable that some claims are consistent with reality; without this, intense anxiety would prevent comforting security.

As a form of knowledge, rumor strives to organize an anxious world. These claims arise under circumstances that are perceived to be important and ambiguous, and in which the parties to the rumor often have low critical ability to judge the information transmitted. Many of the most successful rumors build on their audience’s underlying beliefs that are maintained so devoutly that exploring or questioning the



Rug store owner Bob Rue speaks in front of his shop adorned with graffiti warning looters away in New Orleans on September 4, 2005. Photo by Nicholas Kamm/AFP/TT-Bild.

claim seems unnecessary. This is particularly evident in war, disaster, or a political crisis. For example, recall in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. state of Louisiana, the instinctive way in which even well-educated, liberal-thinking news commentators were quick to report that Black residents housed in the city's Superdome sports arena were engaging in rampant acts of rape, murder, looting, or even cannibalism. No first-hand evidence of any such extreme disorder ever emerged. In other words, rumor shapes how people think and then respond to the world around them, sometimes justifying prejudice and the status quo, and sometimes sparking social reform or even rebellion. Spreading rumors has a political dimension with the power to alter or bolster social structures. Rumors can be conceived of as maps for action, motivating political critique.

The critical point is that rumors fill important slots for societies. Unraveling their meaning allows us to uncover moral dilemmas that societies face. The examination of rumor reveals the concerns and prejudices of citizens, some hidden and some explicit. Rumor allows a community to discuss and debate issues that may be embarrassing, discomforting, or disturbing. In other words, these claims can be like a canary in the coalmine, an early indication that the situation is becoming dangerous. We can address these beliefs because we can act as if we are talking about real events, not just idiosyncratic beliefs. Rumor allows us to discuss hidden anxieties and desires without claiming these attitudes as our own, asserting that they are true. In other words, through their telling, rumor proposes that fantasies are real. In this, we present ourselves as mere reporters of current events, a reasonable position to take. While we might be blamed as a messenger who brings unpleasant news, such a position is more comfortable than being condemned as a provocateur or a bigot. Even to an unsympathetic audience, the claimed truth of rumor—however incorrect it may prove to be—provides a potent defense. Rumor permits concealed sentiments to enter public debate, gaining a sympathetic audience for assertions that might otherwise be deeply troubling.

## Plausibility and credibility

Through rumors, people come to terms with the power of larger forces, but not just any set of forces. These accounts that we hear must agree with the world as we know it. As rumor scholars have argued over the past seventy-five years, the amount and intensity of rumor can be predicted from the importance of the event, coupled with the ambiguity of interpretation and the lack of critical ability of the audience to make judgments. According to the psychologists Gordon Allport and Leo Postman (1947; Chorus, 1953), these variables are multiplied rather than added. Specifically, the amount and intensity of rumor can be predicted by the importance of the topic multiplied by a measure of its ambiguity, divided by the critical ability of the audience. While obviously these factors are hard to measure, they do suggest that a thoughtful public (a public with high “critical ability”) will be less likely to accept and spread rumor.

In *Improvised News*, a classic study of how rumors spread in the aftermath of disaster, the sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani (1966) argues that people share knowledge because of a collective effort to clarify and tame an ambiguous environment. The collective sense-making of rumor is central to the creation of communal security. As Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis (2010) demonstrate in *The Global Grapevine: Why Rumors of Terrorism, Immigration, and Trade Matter*, this process was dramatically evident in the days and weeks after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 as Americans—and citizens of Western nations—desperately speculated about the possibility of subsequent attacks, the awareness of the government of the planning of the attacks, and the motivations of the terrorist attackers.

How can we know what to believe? Does the information seem believable, given the experiences that people have shared? If it does, does the communicator seem trustworthy, given our previous experiences with the speaker? This requires the recognition of how plausibility and credibility matter. We judge possible futures by assessing the claim and personalizing the source. People judge what we hear based on whether it make sense in light of our view of the world and our view of the narrator. Put another way, belief and trust are the core techniques by which we evaluate those claims with which we are presented; each depends on how we judge our local relations.

In traditional forms of communication, our networks are clustered or even cliquish. The people that we know are likely to know each other.

People judge what we hear based on whether it make sense in light of our view of the world and our view of the narrator.

Such is the basis of community. This permits information to flow rapidly; however, at the same time, it does not permit external checking. Psychologists have the concept of “groupthink” (Janis, 1972) that addresses the problem.

This is the situation in which a close-knit group (such as a government committee) will not reach outside its membership to gather alterna-

tive views of the situation or diverse options for action. While this does not necessarily involve rumor behavior, such intense communication leaves open the possibility of rumors being believed and false rumors not being corrected. These tight relational structures shape the extent that a community’s beliefs can be influenced, challenged, or reinforced. Bounded clusters are prone to become silos or echo chambers in which unsecured information is accepted when it reinforces unconsidered belief.

## Fast and slow, hot and cool rumors

Rumors are simultaneously embedded in the two essential realms of human sense-making: emotions and cognition. While each may be thought of as being tied to individuals, in reality each depends on social relations. We think and feel as members of those groups that are meaningful to us; we are members of groups with shared values and perspectives. Widely known rumors gain power because they add—or appear to add—knowledge. We judge them and embrace those that seem legitimate. Rumor is tied to our considered thoughts, perhaps coolly rational. In contrast, some rumors gain their power because they bolster emotions, and these we can refer to as hot rumors. Rumors can be thoughtful or emotionally intense. More than this, rumors can be fast or slow, demanding an immediate response or a dispassionate judgment through collective discussion. While these responses are often linked to emotional responses or cognitive considerations, at times cognitive responses are rapid as well.

In each case rumor supports the desire—an understandable desire—for prediction and security. If we prefer to think that we prize considerations that are slow and cool, at times rapid responses are necessary, when crises are upon us if we can prevent those responses from involving noxious prejudices. These are cases in which crisis communication is crucial. It is sometimes remarked that some rumors are “too good to be true,” insisting that we must refrain from doubting those claims out of wish fulfillment. However, it is also the case that there are some rumors that are “too good to be false.” In this case, the rumors fit into our beliefs in such a cozy way that we ignore the fact that their evidentiary basis may be questionable.

Once again, we return to the wisdom of the rumor scholars Allport and Postman (1947), who write of an “effort after meaning.” People are driven to comprehend the chaos that surrounds us in moments of tension, uncertainty, and anxiety. These rumors call for a response and through them we can see the future that we face and can respond to it. We search for hidden knowledge. Claims from those who are thought to be “in the know” often have great weight in shaping action.

Emotion-filled rumors are often critical in helping people navigate a changing environment. Nowhere is this more evident than as frightened publics speculated on the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 and extrapolated from the bits of data that became available. Although this form of coping is not always desirable from an institutional perspective,

as it undercuts the claims from experts and authorities, it mattered greatly to individuals as they worked through their complex emotions. Anxiety relies on this process. To find emotional confidence is to tame anxiety. This is seen clearly in those conspiracy theories that claim to expose the hidden plots of the powerful and in wedge rumors that condemn ethnic out-groups or global enemies.

Conspiracy theories are often central carriers of uncertain information, although we might better call them conspiracy stories. Can we evaluate what is real through plumes of smoke and whirls of dust? Can we get to the hidden and base motives of the malign and the powerful? Conspiratorial claims depend on the shared suspicion of legitimate institutions, postulating powerful evildoers. Rumor scholars such as the French folklorist Véronique Campion-Vincent (2005) argue that there are more accounts of conspiracies currently in play than in the past, increasingly targeting elite actors and organizations. Her concern is apparent in the global rise of populism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and nativism, in Sweden as elsewhere. While the evidence that is produced is rarely definitive and almost never from “authoritative sources,” those in the conspiracy community pull back a curtain to reveal those whom they consider to be malicious puppet masters. In conditions of mistrust, these rumors that blossom from skepticism have fertile soil in which to take root. This sensitivity to conspiracy is what writers such as the distinguished American historian Richard Hofstadter (1964) label a paranoid style of thought, recognizing that people often claim that what appears on the surface hides what is really happening. When we confront crises—moments that demand immediate action and that depend on accepting the claims of those with institutional responsibilities—such suspicions produce less than optimal civic responses.

## Rumors today – and tomorrow

We reside in an evolving, ambiguous, challenging world. To be sure, every generation might legitimately make this claim. Technology, travel, and new forms of social relations matter. Rumor has a future just as it has a past. While rumor as a form of uncertain knowledge will always respond to shared anxieties, changes in access to communication and its forms will shift as social structures shift. Communication technologies keep developing, broadening the reach and the realm of information. So do the values that are embraced. Political issues become newly

salient, and some eventually are seen as solved—whether they are or not. These beliefs ask the question of who we are and what are the proper boundaries of our communities. In other words, such beliefs are closely linked with personal identities, but these identities are changeable and collective, just as cohorts of citizens change over time. Adults are minted and others shuffle from the stage.

We address three components of this change by recognizing that what we see as plausible and who we see as credible are tied to a world that is altering in ways that are surprising, disturbing, or even enlightening. The last is not to be dismissed. Even when we recognize the strains, ambiguities, and confusions, not all rumors are harmful or hurtful. Indeed, many are positive in content. Social change may lead to more opportunities. Elites and those with aspirations of social mobility may find these changes predicted by uncertain claims that are highly desirable, as may once oppressed groups that are newly incorporated into society. Rumor is not communication that is limited to lower classes or to those who are uneducated.

To understand how rumor operates today and, through extrapolation, how it may operate in the future, we point to three elements that have changed the spread and the impact of rumors and that must be addressed by those who have the responsibility of crisis communication. Specifically, we examine the rise of social media, the increased availability of sources of knowledge, and increased global communication. Each of these changes must be considered to provide the public with secure information.

## Social media

Despite its seeming omnipresence, we might well ask what is social media? While there are many definitions, technologies, and boundaries, social media refers to websites, discussion boards, and online communication channels (such as Facebook, X, or Instagram) that permit people to participate in networked communication, apart from face-to-face gatherings, typically with the possibility of exchange among the participants. While traditional legacy media has been unidirectional, social media permits and even demands interactive engagement. No longer are there just magazines, newspapers, or broadcasts that demand little response from their audiences. Contemporary social media thrives on this multidirectional flow of communication. Of course, one should

not exaggerate the distinctions as traditional media has often had a niche or specialized audience (conservative radio talk shows, liberal newspapers, or radical magazines), and traditional media has allowed for some measure of interaction in the form of letters to the editor or phone calls from listeners. However, the immediacy, personalization, and possibility of establishing a community separates new media from realms that have come before. Social media is letter writing on steroids.

As recently as two decades ago, we did not speak of social media, even if online websites and emails were spreading belief claims more widely. Today, however, these immediate and personal domains are prevalent, worrisome in part, but also the source of much information. Both Facebook and Twitter (now X) are powerful global phenomena. Other platforms, some legitimate and others less so—like TikTok, Reddit, Telegram, or WhatsApp—are popular. Social media permit claims to spread with astonishing speed, but at the same time encourage the belief that participants belong to the same community and that they matter to each other. Whether they do in reality is an open question.

This has several effects on the spread of rumor, although it must be emphasized that traditional media is still a major source of the rapid spread of rumor and uncertain information of all kinds. However, social media permits more individuals from a diverse array of tiny publics to participate in society's effort after meaning. No longer are there only a few sanctioned communicators. Today, almost everyone has the potential to reach a wider audience. This communicative technology expands what once was known as "word-of-mouth." Not only is the communications network wider, it is also faster. In a matter of moments, anyone can reach a large swath of their network, and these individuals, if they so choose, can repost these thoughts to their own networks. People learn information more rapidly, and not only is information learned, but other individuals can critique it, sometimes quite harshly. As the journalist Jon Ronson (2015) recognizes, these critiques can be mean, even destructive, leading to the loss of one's livelihood. Ideally, we will be exposed to diversity in the content of posts, but, in reality, we exist in intellectual and political silos. The friends that we choose to associate with are likely to think like us, and their friends tend to think like them. This is as true on social media as it is in "real life." Rather than finding a space in which varied opinions can be respectfully discussed, we often feel most comfortable in an echo chamber, and when those who disagree participate, the response is often far from

respectful. The original goal of the Internet in bringing diverse viewpoints together seems to be very distant.

Prior to the development and popularity of social media, rumors took a long time to reach a broad public, but once rooted, it also took a long time for false information to be rejected. Today, rumor spreads rapidly but can collapse at the same speed. This poses challenges for those whose position requires that they provide the public with secure, sanctioned information. Memes ebb and flow powerfully like the waves of a tsunami, and this reality requires that those with the responsibility to protect the public in a crisis must be nimble in providing alternative explanations and believable denials, while maintaining credibility considering the skepticism that many have of any authority figure who is assumed to be acting out of their own self-interest.

## Expanding knowledge sources

In addition to the exchange and involvement that social media permits is the simple reality that today there are many more information sources than ever before. The hydrant of facts is going full blast. The small number of television channels and radio stations that once controlled information flow several decades ago is outdated. Competition has blossomed. Everyone, it seems, is a content producer. Users can select websites that reflect their own political, sexual, or avocational interests. Extreme discussion sites such as 4Chan and other locations on the so-called “Dark Web” can create community and build suspicion or hostility. Anyone with an idea, no matter how wise, foolish, or malign, can find a soapbox on the computer in their bedroom or basement. We find a Speaker’s Corner in our private spaces. While there were always conspiratorial groups and specialized communities of interest, the ease of communicating when anyone can establish a web address reminds us of the divergent perspectives on society. Despite some attempts at control by powerful Internet sites—including Facebook, X, and YouTube, willing to censor what they consider to be false or conspiratorial—the web itself does not easily permit the outlawing of claims.

Of course, it is not only the Internet. Television viewers in much of Europe and North America have access to over one hundred cable television channels with varying formats and political perspectives. One is no longer limited to nearby radio stations but can readily listen

to music and talk from around the world. What was once crackly short-wave communication has become clear to everyone. This increases what one can access, but it often produces a discordant chorus of voices. Yet, without a small number of outlets that provide consensually accepted and socially shared knowledge (a set of expert claims), it is all too easy to avoid claims of which one's fellow citizens are aware. Knowledge is fragmented and community becomes fragmented as a result.

This poses challenges for crisis communication. The range of knowledge claims, uncertain as they may be, makes effective messages from government sources difficult. While official information during a crisis may prove to be incomplete or even inaccurate, it is often the best that is available. People look for predictions from trustworthy sources and ignore those from communicators that they doubt, but when there are different opinions about what to trust, this creates a context in which consensus becomes more difficult. There are domains in which who constitutes a credible source is a matter of intense dispute. While in cultural domains this might provide a healthy breath of diverse aesthetic preferences, when one hopes to move the public to take protective action, the presence of a diversity of sources makes accepting official advice more difficult. If in the aftermath of a terrorist attack (real or alleged) segments of the public listen to disparate sources each with its own perspective on what has happened and why, then it is challenging to sustain coordinated responses. The same is true of responding to a pandemic or a case of police brutality. Perhaps at first the public will accept official information, but soon after the immediate crisis has passed, consensus evaporates, and multiple claims create competing realities. This is not inevitably a harmful thing, as official information may be shaded or deceptive. Still, the proliferation of accounts is especially characteristic of our diverse age, not to mention that some forms of information may more properly be termed entertainment.

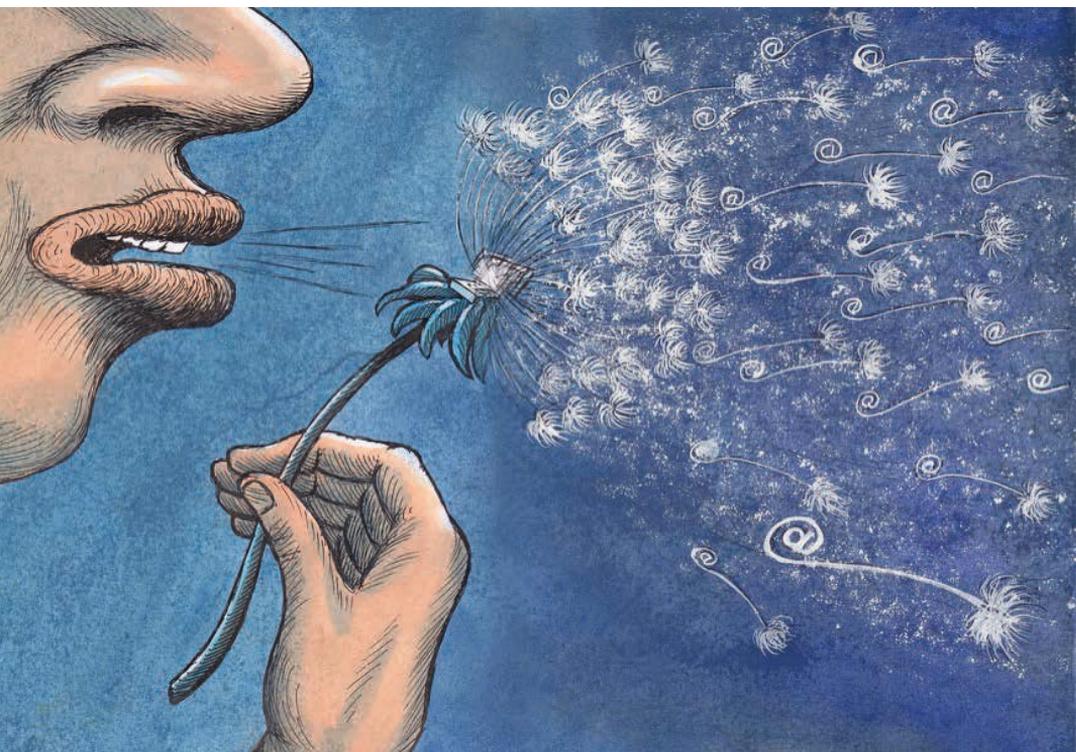
## Globalization

The third feature that has shaped the embrace of information is the rise and expansion of globalized networks. For centuries, goods have been transported from place to place, now more efficiently than ever. We are no longer surprised to find fruit, fish, or flowers that are not locally sourced. Restaurants that claim that they only serve local ingredients now seem gimmicky. Information, on the other hand, was assumed to have a national or a local provenance. How often did a Swede get to know what the average Dane was thinking, much less an American, Czech, Laotian, Algerian, or Turk. Today, despite acrimonious debates about the immigration of bodies, information easily crosses borders.

Each community develops its own criteria of what is considered plausible and who is considered credible, although admittedly, as we described, these assessments may be fragmented. Still, when information crosses borders, the judgments become more uncertain, dependent on national beliefs as to what is plausible. While the veracity of information is always judged considering the life experience of audience members, people credit stories that are well told. Beyond this, a globalized information field makes the judgment of the credibility of sources an issue. Credibility fades as a crucial determinant as plausibility rises, but given that conspiracy is seen as possible and mistrust is common, much that might not have been considered plausible is now taken as worthy of consideration. The likelihood of belief expands when more is considered possible, judgement is less secure, and the virtue of the communicator becomes hard to evaluate.

The problem with the global spread of information is heightened when we recognize that there are mischievous actors or state-controlled manipulators spreading false or misleading information. Many Americans and Europeans, for example, are worried about information on social media sites that are alleged to be posted by Russian or Chinese agents. It is hard to know precisely who supports these posters, but the information often involves conspiracies designed to undercut trust in our institutions. While we cannot ascertain that these messages have affected any election contest, it is equally difficult to claim that they have had no effect. What is impressive, if disturbing, is how global these actors seem to be and how easy it is to spread untrustworthy information.

Together these three elements—social media, expanded information sources, and globalization—help explain how rumor operates today and how rumor may evolve in the future as we extrapolate from the present.



A political cartoon by Vladimir Kazanevsky, Ukraine.

## Filtered knowledge

We have emphasized that rumor is knowledge filtered through social relations and institutional connections, but what happens when doubt dominates? This connects to the awarding of trust in others, leading to trust in information. Rumor and trust are intimately linked. Under what circumstances and on what basis can we be confident in the claims with which we are presented? How can we police a space for uncertain knowledge? In a world in which some might distract us or mislead us, must we throw up our hands in hopeless confusion? Does angst carry the day? Has the bright security of trust eroded so completely that we are in a darkened land?

Inevitably, our judgments depend on agreements within a local relational network, reminding us that the existence of community can never be separated from a psychology of belief. Trust results from a secure sense of community, and when trust in the credibility of sources is eroded, suspicion can dominate. Even worse things happen

if communities explode. Contemporary societies have not entirely lost their communal sensibility, but it is easy to find threats to a cohesive community. We properly worry about the siloing of information in which a broad commitment to community becomes more fragile. Judging information in terms of whether we should act on it or spread it further is tied to the trust in those publics to which we belong, revealing a communal effort at sense-making. Although this still remains the basis by which we judge information, we can easily imagine that if the present trends continue and are not offset by more positive developments, then it will be increasingly difficult to create shared, comforting truth claims. We depend on those with whom we have developed relationships of trust to reduce uncertainty, but what happens if the relationships change, and trust dissipates? When members of the public feel confident in the authority of these groups, the public will act in accord with the advice given, but when the government is seen as manipulative or as operating out of its own interest, protective claims will fail to achieve their goals. The divide between fact and rumor becomes increasingly hazy as we doubt what constitutes secure information.

At the heart of all forms of collective action is the need for secure information, which leads to personal security. When people gather, definitive knowledge is often in short supply and yet the desire to know is great. Uncertainty generates concern and, as a consequence, there is an insistent desire to know, placing oneself and one's community on a firmer footing. Whereas formal institutional actors (governments, economic organizations, or agencies of social control) produce official knowledge, communities often depend on truth claims that are hard to evaluate. Access to secure information reflects the stability of the political structure, and rumor plays a vital role in directing the course of action.

As we have emphasized, rumor is information that is spread without secure standards of evidence. This is both important to recognize and confusing to operationalize. The predictive value of rumor is uncertain, both in its origins and accuracy. Of course, what constitutes unsecured knowledge is a matter of judgment, debate, and perspective. Those with different politics have different anxieties about the future and often see the world differently. This is particularly evident in light of reactions to government statements. Some suggest that official pronouncements should be treated as secure by virtue of the authority of their sponsors, while others suggest that the motivation to deceive makes official pronouncements potentially biased; still others suggest that institutions

outside of government may have access to secure knowledge through their own connections, even if this access is unofficial. Further, rumors may make claims about events in the past (“The Swedish government knows who assassinated Olof Palme and why”), statements about the present (“the COVID-19 virus is mutating in dangerous ways in South Africa”), or claims about the future (“the euro will be discontinued as a transnational currency”).

Rumor is often present in situations of heated emotion, of confused cognition, or of chaotic action.

Rumor is often present in situations of heated emotion, confused cognition, or chaotic action. This can include situations of crowd behavior or collective gatherings and, as a result, crisis communication is crucial. Research on responses to disasters and political uprisings suggests the prevalence of rumors. As mentioned, the symbolic interactionist Shibutani

(1966) was the most influential theorist of rumor as a form of collective behavior. He became interested in the dynamics of rumor after spending time in Japanese American internment camps during World War II, where information seeking was prevalent and certain knowledge was rare. Shibutani brought together numerous widely dispersed case studies to argue that during moments of public concern—and being forced to stay behind barbed wire certainly qualified—communities reveal a powerful desire for information. In a similar fashion, one can conceive that rumor is a form of “intensified information seeking.” At such times, people search for whatever information they can glean from others who are often as anxious and confused as they are about what is happening. Shibutani suggests that rumor constitutes a form of improvised news as people communicate without being able to ascertain the truth of what they hear; instead, they search for markers of confidence about the ambiguous events that swirl around them. Some interpretation is better than none. Shibutani’s model has become a standard approach to rumor in situations of collective behavior. Subsequently, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1987) have suggested that a central goal of those who gather collectively is to discover the proper norms for behavior in that place and time.

Shibutani’s model has proved particularly influential in the explanation of riots, as folklorist Janet Langlois (1983) demonstrates in her examination of rumors during the 1943 Belle Isle racial riots in the U.S. city of Detroit. Langlois discovered that similar rumors were spread in Black and White communities, but, significantly, with the race of the

actors switched, a common occurrence as Gary Alan Fine and Patricia Turner (2001) describe in their analysis of the pattern of racial rumors in the United States. Rumor must fit moral expectations. Misleading information, suggesting hostile actions by an outsider group, can cause a “tinderbox” to catch on fire. Racial conflict is, of course, a particularly American trauma, but European nations are not without their share of riots and rebellions over religion, ethnicity, class, and labor activity. The research of Campion-Vincent (2005) is exemplary in revealing the bases of European (and French) rumor panics, showing how rumor attempts to explain the effects of shadowy elites, immigrants, natural disasters, and other imagined dangers.

While riots are often motivated by material grievances, beliefs are also important stimulants for violence. During periods of institutional threat and collective disorder, governments or civic groups establish rumor control centers as a form of crisis communication, hoping to present information that will be seen as “accurate.” Whether these agencies actually provide true information as opposed to calming claims, whether angry and frightened residents trust these claims, and whether they decrease the amount of violence are all open to question. Government agencies might prioritize messages that attempt to suppress the violence, even if those claims are later discounted. When discovered to be false, the bar for trust in the future will be higher and rumor control will become more difficult. However, it is widely accepted that control of information is one means by which civil disturbances can be prevented or mitigated, explaining the popularity of rumor control centers and crisis communication management.

Because of their unofficial character, seemingly outside the control of authorities or elites, rumors may magnify the influence of conspiratorial groups. The classic study is the book *Rumor in Orleans* by the French sociologist Edgar Morin (1971). He examines a set of interlinked rumors (termed a rumor complex) that alleged that Jewish dress shop owners were drugging young French women and selling them into forced prostitution (“white slavery”). The fact that the targets were well-to-do is consistent with the finding of Campion-Vincent (2005) that elites stand behind many conspiracies.

While riots are often motivated by material grievances, beliefs are also important stimulants for violence.

While rumor is found throughout society, it is often dramatically present in moments of uncertainty and change. Perhaps we can say that society is always evolving; every moment is a moment of uncertainty. However, recent times seem especially characterized by uncertainty after the major dislocations caused by the coronavirus, decisions about immigration, and in the United States the turmoil, demonstrations and riots in the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

## The dynamics of audience

What can be said about audiences for information? They can be usefully differentiated into those that present and those that imagine. Those who present truth claims often compose their words for an assumed audience. Likewise, narrators on television, film, podcasts, radio, or websites often address imagined others, assuming the likely responses of their audiences. Those talking on the telephone or those who are visually impaired have a similar problem, although it is less pronounced because these narrators can depend on the verbal or paraverbal responses of their audience. The greater the amount of feedback, the more an account can be shaped to the reactions of another.

Audiences differ in their emotions and how they evaluate what they hear, in part depending on the setting and in part a consequence of the speakers' connection to their audience. Some audiences are hostile or suspicious, whereas others are accepting or gullible. Business executives may focus on what they imagine is the hidden, hostile motivation of the narrator of a claim that attacks industry, whereas those who mistrust capitalist enterprises might find the very same texts plausible, embracing them on face value. The same text can be treated as certain truth by some, as a plausible account by others, as a wild speculation by still others, and as a deliberate fabrication by skeptics.

Audiences have a moral and communal responsibility to make talk flow. Good talkers need good listeners and, in some measure, good listeners generate good talkers. In informal discourse being a good listener does not mean that one is respectfully silent while an authority talks. Conversation is never a lecture. In contrast, a proper narrative involves collaboration. This shared talk is particularly characteristic of rumor, where audience judgment may be expected. A narrative may

be, in effect, a question more than an answer, and in such cases, a good audience is an active, curious, participating audience.

A further characteristic of a good audience is that it supports the speaker's intentions and contributes to the achievement of the speaker's goals, whether the audience accepts those goals as their own. This does not mean that audience members must believe the claim, but that they recognize that it provides a view of the nature of the world. Smooth interaction, on which a civil society depends, must be negotiated. Rumors do not depend on a suspension of disbelief, but rather on a belief in the primacy of conversation. What goes on in the head is of less significance than what goes on between bodies.

## Cultures of trust

Rumors are both spread and judged within communities. Information and its evaluation are always socially located, not merely the domain of individuals. Although rumor researchers properly examine the characteristics of audiences and their critical ability to judge rumor, these approaches downplay how communal judgments create shared responses. This is like the necessity to distinguish between personal memory and collective memory. While memories belong to individuals, they are shaped and become useful when they reflect a group reality. These communities operate through both interaction and separate processes of institutionalization where belief systems are more than a collection of believing selves.

The audience for any claim must determine whether it should be awarded trust. While individuals rely on personal assessments, this is an uncertain process in that few individuals can judge truth for themselves, even if they accept it provisionally. As the cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) emphasizes, thought and judgment are inevitably social, not personal or universal. We participate in knowledge cultures. What we believe has much to do with those groups and social networks in which we participate. We have shared standards for evaluating both claims and the people who make them. Our communities provide the basis by which we embrace or deny the evaluations of others, sharing our perspectives with those we trust. Our social engagements affect the extent and longevity of rumor in a community.

The amount of rumor within a network varies widely, but how are these differences linked to the presence or absence of trust within a social system? While we describe several dimensions, a smoothly functioning civil society benefits from a moderate level of rumor, both in its frequency and diffusion. Societies overwhelmed by distrust and those characterized by fear or apathetic acceptance are likely to have more and less rumor than the moderate amount of those with an active public sphere.

In this section, we address five dimensions through which patterns of rumor are related to trust: frequency, diffusion, boundary, divisiveness, and stability. Each reflects the form that trust takes in light of the distribution of unsecured communication.

## Frequency

An initial question that arises is the extent to which rumor is present. This is a difficult question to answer in that the boundaries of what constitutes rumor are unclear and no widely accepted methodology judges the precise amount of rumor being discussed at any given time. To answer this question one can either inquire about the number of distinct rumors that are active or the frequency of rumor transmission. In other words, a social system may be characterized by many rumors or by a small set of rumors that are widely spread. However, in each case the existence of rumor reveals both social anxiety and uncertain public confidence in the social system in providing sufficient information. In cases where information is not crucial, rumor can be treated as a form of entertainment, but when authorities suppress information, transmission becomes a form of resistance.

A society in which a large number of rumors are spread (particularly those that address broad anxieties and dangers) often involves a measure of institutional breakdown: Either institutions are not giving out information or are believed not to be providing information that is accurate, fair, or necessary. Authoritarian states are the classic example in which rumor frequency has been linked to system failure. In these cases, the public scornfully rejects official information. Informal communication channels provide alternative knowledge streams to skirt what they feel are manipulative sources. While the state may attempt to suppress oppositional public knowledge, complete control of private talk is impossible. There are always what political scientist James Scott (1985) describes as “hidden arbors” in which counter-narratives are whispered.

State workers have personal ties with others and may share extra-official claims through what we describe as leaks. While democratic states with traditions of free speech do not often attempt to suppress rumor diffusion directly, these rumors may be less robust and consequential than those found when a “Big Brother” government forcefully attempts to stifle what citizens can know. Authoritarianism justifies the spread of rumor, serving as opposition political discourse or as the basis for revolutionary change.

The extreme form of government control—totalitarianism—attempts to control what people can speak. Talk needs to go underground. Thus, it differs from authoritarianism by the degree of surveillance and political control over citizens’ lives. The cases of Nazi Germany (in contrast to Fascist Italy) or Stalinist Russia during the purges (in contrast to Communist Yugoslavia) exemplify these systems. In such a regime, speakers and audiences can be punished harshly for participating in alternative knowledge networks. Because of the value of communication, rumor will continue to spread, but its frequency will be dampened, and its locations will be circumscribed because the state steadily increases the costs of rumoring. It is an empirical question as



Don't babble!  
A propaganda poster  
from the former  
Soviet union, 1941.

to how repression decreases rumor (or shifts its location) as systematic research is clearly impossible. In this case, the information revealed through rumor becomes more valuable as it becomes scarcer. Trust in the system, tied to the internalization of official values and identification with authority, is replaced by pressured conformity. Under conditions of brutal repression, the speaker must trust the audience not to reveal the source of their knowledge.

More rumors with political implications are expected to be found in systems that lack institutional trust, provided the costs of diffusion are not perceived as excessive. In turn, the presence of competing claims and explanations might decrease the amount of trust that citizens award to the system. As a result, political rumor and trust inevitably influence each other.

## Diffusion

Distinct from the number of rumors circulating within a social system is the extent of rumors diffusion. There are two relevant dimensions: how rapidly and how far a rumor will spread—that is, velocity and range, respectively. A rumor can spread swiftly but might only reach a sliver of the population. In contrast, another rumor may spread steadily but slowly. Again, we must consider the effects of forms of communicative technology. The Internet has proven to be a major shaper of contemporary communication. However, the Internet is only the most recent example of a wider phenomenon, one that is evident in the effects of telephone, television, telegraph, fax, or even, gazing further back, the printing press. Technology shapes transmission, creating the dimensions of communication. While diffusion may begin through one technology, other modes of communication (including word of mouth) can extend the reach of the message.

Because of the low cost of diffusion, rumor in cyberspace spreads rapidly and then in the face of contradiction or doubt can collapse. Internet communication represents an archetypal example of minimal trust invested in anonymous diffusers. The Internet is sometimes scorned as an unrestrained space that forces the audience to judge, but, in reality, audiences are less buyers than renters, accepting information provisionally.

Other technologies, including word of mouth, have distinct patterns of diffusion, and are trusted differently. Information systems are understood in terms of the political structure of the social system

in which they are embedded. The openness and cost of participation differentiate technologies, along with the likelihood 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 speeds and with different ranges. The news media make information available in a different fashion than does face-to-face communication. Media platforms can rapidly communicate (and retract) information, reaching diverse populations, whereas direct interpersonal communication depends on lengthy strands of contacts, typically those with much in common. Rumor that spreads through word of mouth typically has a longer lag time between the rumor origin and when diffusion slows; decay is also slower. Each medium has a potential audience that shapes the extent of diffusion, as some technologies cannot reach all populations. These two ways of speeding rumors interact in many situations. People communicate in media platforms about news, personal exchange or about unconfirmed claims.

## Boundaries

Boundaries of information are related to diffusion. Imagine two societies in which a rumor reaches half the population. In one society, communication is random, a function of whom on a given evening happened to be listening to a radio broadcast popular among all citizens. In the second society, radio listening is linked to gender: All women hear the rumor, but none of the men do. While the extent of diffusion is identical, the dynamics of rumor differ greatly. In the second case, what appears to be a single society turns out to be in terms of its informational boundary two non-intersecting societies sharing a geographical space.

The most dramatic contemporary instance of the power of demographic boundaries involves racial and ethnic divides, and the consequent challenge to trust. Black and White Americans are said to have distinctive racialized pools of knowledge (Fine & Turner, 2001; Maines, 1999). This may also be true with regard to ethnic migration in the Eurozone. Groups are often unaware of the beliefs of others. For example, White Americans, as dominant, are particularly liable to be unaware of the knowledge claims of their subalterns, having little direct access to media of the African American community and feeling no reason to be concerned about these beliefs. Rumors among Whites are better known, if only because White-dominated media is more accessible.

African American rumors, more likely to be linked to local communities, often suggest the presence of broad institutional conspiracies. A notable example in this regard is the belief in “The Plan,” described in detail by the folklorist Patricia Turner (1993), an assertion that White elites systematically discredit or murder any Black leader who effectively articulates the grievances of the community. The report that HIV was developed in a government laboratory as a form of biological warfare was similarly spread within Black communities.

Rumors in White communities have different content. These rumors often suggest that Blacks—individuals or small groups—have committed or are planning a horrific crime. Some examples are rumors about cannibalism in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have this form and claims that Black gang members have to rape blonde virgins to be initiated. Unlike rumors in the African American community, these rumors do not assume systemic malice, but they presume that idiosyncratic events are characteristic. They assume moral depravity rather than structural malevolence.

When divergent beliefs are discovered, the assumption of community and its underlying trust is shaken. White Americans assert privately that African Americans are paranoid in their fears of a continuing policy of racial animus or genocide, whereas African Americans assert that the rumors that are found in White communities express covert racism. The willingness to accept rumors that others dismiss depends on the politics of plausibility, tied to historical awareness. Within a community, rumors represent the updating of collective memory. Much of this research has been conducted in the United States where race is central, but a similar argument is possible in Europe with concern over migrant communities.

The default belief is that all people have similar understandings. To be sure, the existence of stories that depict wickedness demonstrate that equality is not taken for granted; rather, it is assumed that all citizens share a body of knowledge. When that assumption is questioned or negated, trust in the equality of social participation is challenged. Societies in which informational boundaries are most salient are those that must confront issues of social trust explicitly.

## Divisiveness

The content of rumor is closely linked to social boundaries. Does the content of these uncertain claims bind groups in common cause or does the content prove divisive? Early rumor research, especially about rumor in wartime (Knapp, 1944) distinguished between fear-based, wish-fulfillment, and wedge-driving rumors; the last category is also salient in times of ethnic strain as well as during war. Divisive rumors fall into this last category, creating boundaries that establish informational divides.

Rumors can separate groups either demographically or institutionally. They can generate suspicion and a breakdown of trust. For example, a rumor from the early 1990s asserted that African American gang members were driving without turning on their headlights (“Lights Out”) and when courteous (White) drivers flashed a warning, these good Samaritans would be murdered. This claim exacerbated mistrust toward young Black male drivers, at least temporarily. Similarly, rumors spread among women about attacks by male sexual predators divide men and women.

Divisive rumors also undercut trust in the legitimacy of authority, targeting the conspiratorial misdeeds of elites. While this is not a new phenomenon (suspicions of bankers or politicians have a lengthy history), such claims have entered mainstream discourse over the past decades. Many rumors doubt official truth claims and give more weight to unsecured knowledge. Rumors that assert that law enforcement agencies are targeting dissidents or that politicians will ban religious activities take policy disputes and transform them into questions about the legitimacy of the institutional order. Rumors that proclaim that authorities deliberately target minority or foreign communities not only reveal the boundaries of diffusion but also emphasize that worldviews can be divisive, and fears can be endemic.

Plausibility judgments not only cause but are embedded in preexisting 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 enter memory as reflecting the divided lifeworlds of citizens.

Rumors can separate groups either demographically or institutionally. They can generate suspicion and a breakdown of trust.

## Stability

The final category relevant to the relationship between trust and rumor concerns the degree to which information is stable. Rumors vary in how rapidly they evolve. The stability of content has long been a significant topic in rumor studies. Early research by Allport and Postman (1947), relying on the research from the important British psychologist F.C. Bartlett (1932), examined the dynamics of memory. They asked what processes alter the content of rumor, demonstrating the effects of forgetting (leveling), emphasis (sharpening), and cognitive consistency (assimilation). The spread of rumor can be likened to the game of telephone in which children, sitting in a circle, whisper a phrase to their neighbor. What is reported at the end bears little resemblance to the original text. Hearing the dramatic and humorous ways in which straight-forward information gets garbled produces much glee. In reality, rumor does not change as wildly as misheard phrases in a children's game, but the idea that what we wish to say is often distorted has been central to rumor scholarship.

While it is often assumed that rumor texts become truncated as they are transmitted (as in laboratory simulations), this is not always true. Some studies find that under conditions of communal excitement rumors are elaborated (Peterson & Gist, 1951). When narration to a rapt audience is status enhancing and when audiences plead for more information, imaginative details may be woven into an embellished account.

Stability can be conceptualized as either temporal stability or content stability. Temporal stability considers whether the same rumors are recalled over time or whether they will fade from memory, perhaps reemerging later. Content stability refers to whether the details that are narrated remain consistent. When examining a body of rumors, temporal instability is easily recognizable. Many rumors will have been forgotten or are no longer actively spread. Content instability is evident when the targets of rumors change (from Danes to Turks, Volvo to Ikea, or ABBA to Adele).

Stability is tied to the dynamics of trust in that unstable rumors suggest a society pressured by social change. This may be interpreted in two ways. First, a lack of stability—either temporal or content—may suggest a society open to change, incorporating new content, processing emerging concerns. In contrast, the absence of stability may indicate that new fears



An illustration by M. Magnus Norman, Sweden.

threaten to overwhelm the social order. Rumor scholars have not yet evaluated these hypotheses, in part because of the difficulty of gathering rumor texts systematically. Until these research problems are solved, rumor research will remain at the level of insightful hunches and informed guesswork.

## Beyond a culture of rumor

Given that rumor constitutes a means to examine public concern, we should never condemn its presence out of hand. Yet, we should not embrace rumor as a form of unthinking support for the status quo. Sometimes we need to shake the fears we have, and here rumor can be a guide to problems that must be confronted. We must avoid treating any claim as equivalent to truth; each must be judged as best we can. Even if facts may be hazy, they are not fiction. Our beliefs about alien others—both within our society and outside—can be dangerous. In a world of deep and powerful interconnections, we need each other, even if we recognize that strains and competition cannot be casually erased.

Ultimately, the world is a rumor bazaar, often filled with bizarre rumors. Buyers and sellers choose their goods depending on their fears, their hopes, and their dreams: on what they consider plausible and who they consider credible. Rumors, whether about terrorism, immigration, racism, capitalism, or disease, can always be found. If they are not desired, then they must be confronted vigorously, as we discuss below. Every culture has a street on which talk is cheap. The examination of uncertain information involves revealing and then addressing the beliefs and values the public embraces. These narratives quicken our pulse and raise our temperature. The claim that rumors are about facts and events permits them to spread values and emotions. Our goal is not to discover whether rumors are present—they will always be—but rather to learn what themes are most common, through which channels they are spread, and what concealed sentiments they reveal. In this, rumors, as they exist and evolve, shape the future of our lives together.

## Countering rumors

Given the scenarios discussed in the previous section, how can rumors be addressed by those responsible for crisis management? Many rumors with which crisis managers must deal are on their face disheartening and even dangerous. In a world that is fractured and rife with disorienting change, is secure knowledge ever possible? Just as trust is grounded in the plausible and the credible, change demands a rethinking of what is known and believed. However, even as change may challenge trust in one area, open-minded exposure could build it in another. As we learn more, confidence may eventually triumph, and when novelty is defined as progress, something innovative may be embraced as enjoyable and eventually as comfortable. Nevertheless, the public still needs to be guided with the best information available presented by those with the responsibility to care.

Salient events and the rumors associated with them are linked to debates over the legitimacy of trust. A reasonable goal for a vibrant civil society is transparency of information. By this we mean that the claims that citizens make should be consistent with how things really are as best as can be determined. However, such an optimistic and happy desire is often undercut in practice; tragedy and melodrama are common genres of collective thought. Some of this anxiety about the future results from the hidden effects of power and some is a result of the willingness—even the preference—of the public to believe and, perhaps, be comforted by imagining conspiracies.

Not surprisingly, rumors provide a wealth of perspectives that demonstrate that one can all too easily place disfavored groups into positions of moral disrepute. The willingness to cast aspersions reveals that trust is not given unconditionally or absolutely. Trust can imply identification or that an individual or group will act out of its own interests, even undercutting the smooth functioning of society.

Given the potential of noxious claims to diminish communal trust, we must carefully monitor our response. We would be deceived if we pretended that rumor can ever be fully halted—or that it should be. The presence of rumors suggests that tellers and audiences care about the health of their society, and they provide messages about public concerns. Still, some maxims can help control the mischief of mistake. To this end, we propose five elementary rules that can caution and direct us when confronted with threatening stories, edging us into a better future.

## Question easy truth claims

A crucial step in understanding rumor is to question claims that seem too good to be false. The claims seem simultaneously strange and plausible. Yet, a rumor is not a claim that is necessarily true or false; rather, it is a statement that varies in its plausibility. How politics plays out in local communities determines whether a rumor will be embraced. We often spread those things of which we should be skeptical, but skepticism is hard to come by because it is precisely the “obvious truth” of rumors that makes them so compelling. We do not insist that we be given proof for much of what we are told, and on most occasions, we are wise to accept what we hear. It is precisely those things that we are most ready to accept that we should challenge. Proof is especially required whenever it seems least necessary.

An effective rule of thumb is that we should discount stories that depend on the condemnation of a group that we found questionable prior to the telling. Even when information appears to be highly specific, it still may be false. Despite the presence of compelling details that bolster the tale, those details may be of doubtful accuracy: what is now labeled fake news. Inquiring about the source of a story may not always help. Tellers may recall having read a rumor in a responsible media outlet, even though the information had been debunked or whispered by a colleague or friend. Sometimes, stories are spread through the media but have not been fact-checked or are exaggerated. We must not assume that rumors that turn out to be false are shaped maliciously; more frequently they change in an unconscious attempt to bolster the narrator’s credibility.

When confronting a hostile, wedge-driving rumor, we should accept negative information provisionally. One cannot simply ignore compelling stories, however sharp they may be, but the information should be taken as unproven. Listeners who are aware of the range of rumors often recognize that they have heard similar claims before, perhaps with only a few details altered. The popular volumes by writers such as Bengt af Klintberg or Jan Brunvand on contemporary legends compiled over the past quarter century have led those who might otherwise be gullible listeners to recognize that a particular story sounds “like an urban legend.” When we recognize that a story seems like a rumor, our healthy skepticism is likely to be bolstered and prejudices curbed.

## Change happens

Rumors that address issues of globalization look to the future as frequently as to the past or present. The reality is that, whether we are comfortable or not, societies are always in flux. The clock cannot be set back or stopped from ticking. In a world in which advanced societies demand cheap labor and workers desire mobility for personal or family benefits, the character of national populations will shift. Likewise, in a world in which both trade and tourism are desired, the global transport of goods is easy, and people search for novel and appealing experiences, interchanges among nations will continue and, as more people have access to resources, are likely to expand. Nations are not islands: This metaphor of separation is increasingly inapplicable to the reality of global connections. While the idea of national identity is not likely to disappear, one can sense in the European Union, for example, the growth of larger super-national identities based on region, questioning the linkage between culture and citizenship, as the opposition and resentment to that perspective are also widely evident, as in the case of Brexit and other nationalist challenges to a pan-European identity.

Finally, the threats of terrorist violence, no longer linked to disputes within national borders, reveal that the apparent unipolar global stability which emerged after the end of the Cold War did not end history. While terrorist attacks, outside of certain global hotspots, are now rare, they reveal political strains made more evident through the borders that are open to legal and undocumented immigrants. There is no certainty whether radical groups will rise or fall in prominence in the decades to come; however, it is certain that the world in 2040 will have different strains than the world today.

## Remember the past(s)

To survive we must consider potential futures: paths that lead from the present. It is also essential that we examine how we reached the point at which paths diverge. Just as there are multiple futures that can be imagined and prepared for, there are also multiple pasts. Many forces have contributed to how we understand our present. This does not mean that there is a large set of equally plausible alternative universes, but rather there are many explanations for our current situation.

Today in advanced nations, multicultural images have become more accepted. Immigration has long been part of the American heritage, incorporating Swedes and others yearning to breathe free, made evident by the Statue of Liberty. Nevertheless, even European nations more tied to the solidification of a particular image of national ethnicity can see benefits of welcoming immigrants of different ethnic backgrounds. However, this partially explains the difficulty of Sweden, among other nations, in incorporating their new residents, and this sometimes shapes harsh political debates. On occasion, immigration becomes a heated issue—as it is today in Sweden and throughout the European Union—but the idea that legal immigration is healthy and that certain immigrants should be welcomed is common.

While alternatively welcoming and fretting over immigrants, nations have also had mixed feelings about international trade. Should Swedes support their own industries? Scandinavian ones? Nordic ones? European ones? Should there be tariffs to protect industry? If so, how much protection do local industries and national workers deserve? Of course, one's stance has much to do with one's economic self-interest, as consumers typically desire low tariffs and manufacturers wish for tariff protection. Factory workers and farmers have their own perspectives as to which products deserve protection from international competition. This debate is evident today as we explore the impact of free trade on national economies. We might well ask free for whom?

Similarly, the presence of terrorism requires that we situate political violence in its historical context, a strategy that can be traced to the nineteenth century. ISIS and Al Qaeda belong to a tradition that developed from theories of direct political action, linked, in part, to the complexities of relations between the West and the Islamic world. This fraught relationship dates to the Crusades and the Moorish invasion of Spain, and, of course, to more recent examples of Western colonialism and oil-based imperialism throughout the Middle East.

The rumors that we face result from historical patterns, just as surely as they predict future directions. We must gaze backward and forward as we strive to understand the present.

## Build strengths

Responding to rumor requires recognizing social strengths. While diversity has social costs and challenges, heterogeneity also has benefits in contrast to the limits of homogeneous societies. Diverse national and ethnic groups carry novel and insightful ideas, traditions, customs, and behavior, providing an enlarged and enriched toolkit of action.

By embracing the inevitability of globalization and the value of diversity, societies provide a break against the most malign forms of rumor, particularly those that are targeted at the poorest and weakest. Not all forms of globalization should be embraced with lusty abandon, but the reality of national interconnections provides benefits. We must determine cautiously and carefully which forms of globalization strengthen us, without assuming thoughtlessly that the breaking of walls and the breaching of boundaries is inherently dangerous.

## Unity comes with time

The most salient aspect of the attempt to confront and control rumor is the recognition that rumors are not easily mastered. This is an ongoing challenge, never a simple tweak. Rumor control takes time and sometimes rumors retreat because they become widely known and, as a result, they evaporate as mundane. Part of the justification for the spread of rumors is their vibrancy and diversion. When rumors stagnate, they lose their conversational value.

In examining the long sweep of Western history, the reality is that the boundaries of citizenship have expanded over generations, as has the openness to the moral standing of those different from us. The dividing line between *us* and *them*, while not erased, has become smudged, and campaigns to “buy local” have rarely been met with enormous success, whether the target is automobiles, shoes, or shirts.

The passage of time allows us to adjust to new social arrangements, and this is surely the case regarding those scenarios that we discuss in this volume. Yet, as citizens become adjusted to the benefits and costs of new social relations, a deepened well-spring of good feeling can be found. This does not suggest that after a deadly police killing, a rapid increase in migration, an unknown virus, a massive forest fire, or a recognition of a

Rumor control takes time and sometimes rumors retreat because they become widely known and, as a result, they evaporate as mundane.

new economic threat that there will not be rumors and false beliefs. These events alter what is deemed plausible and who is considered credible. Crises create the opportunity for new social arrangements, and crisis communication helps us achieve a new normal and comforting certainty. Still, over time the boundaries of what is considered exotic shift, incorporating more people and more possibilities. In time, we edge toward that core belief that despite our differences we have a shared commitment to belonging and to our protective institutions.

# CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND RUMORS

In the previous part, Gary Alan Fine explained the causes of rumors, including their distinct types and characteristics, and discussed their current environment, diffusion across boundaries, and how they can be addressed and countered. In this part of the book, we aim to shed light over the linkages between rumors and crisis communication. We start with a brief overview and introduction of the field of crisis communication, then continue to illustrate the role of rumors in different crisis phases. We discuss rumors in the digital media environment during crises and what research tells us about effective crisis communication that reduces and limits the effects of rumors in crisis situations. The concluding section includes several illustrative cases of rumors during crises.

## Rumors and crisis situations

As we have seen in the previous part of this book, rumors are an inevitable part of human communication and prevalent in our relationships with friends, in our teams and communities, organizations, and societies. We have discussed the difference between rumors and related concepts such as lies, fake news, and disinformation. Another related concept is “miscommunication,” when we communicate and think we understand each other but have different interpretations or meanings of the message or communication content. We might think that it is easy to distinguish between a lie and a rumor, or a rumor and fake news, but sometimes it is not so easy. There is often a blurred line and no clear boundaries between these concepts and rumors, because the concept of rumor itself is vague and difficult to define, as we have discussed in the first part of this book. Some rumors are short lived and vanish fast,

while others really have sticking power and can hover around for years, go away, and then suddenly return.

What is important, however, is that at some point in time rumors become so extensive and widespread that they become a threat. Their consequences can be so severe that they need to be countered or managed. Rumors are particularly prevalent in crisis situations.

Rumors can have tremendous negative effects in our societies. They may seriously threaten the operations of a business company, negatively influence trust in authorities, create resistance toward health advice, increase skepticism toward research results (for example, on climate change), and instill public concern among whole populations of people, making them take opposite actions than what are recommended for their safety.

When rumors become a serious threat, there is a need for organizations to act. As shown by the examples in the previous chapter, rumors are a significant part of various kinds of crisis processes. Rumors can cause crises, but they are also in most cases a significant part of crises. They thrive in situations when information is scarce, ambiguity is high, and public concern is extensive, and people need to make sense of what is happening. Rumors appear almost instantly in cases where public authorities or governments are silent or are not commenting on developments. This is due to the perceived information gap that people need to fill with ideas, attitudes, and beliefs on what is going on. The public wants to know what is happening to understand its consequences for their daily lives. Rumors tend to fill the information gap in these situations in making sense of the dramatic events.

In addition, most crises are perceived differently by different citizens and diverse segments of the population. This means that groups of people with contrasting opinions or perceptions of reality may have an interest in spreading rumors that are supporting their own views on current developments.

It is worth noting that large-scale contemporary crises in our societies—such as pandemics or financial crises—are often complex. Their origins, developments, and effects are not easy to understand and are often under debate even among experts and decision-makers. Rumors fill the gap in these situations as they provide people with simple, clear-cut messages that seem to make sense and meet the public demand for clarified and understandable information. The examples in the subsequent part of the book strongly support the idea that it is highly relevant

to study the linkage between rumors and crisis communication, and it is essential to remember this linkage when discussing ways to implement effective crisis management procedures and practices.

## Crisis communication concepts and three phases of crises

Crises can broadly be defined as situations that may be perceived as serious threats against basic values for individuals or groups in society. They normally appear suddenly, involve many actors, demand decision-making under time pressure while managing uncertainty, and include the media both as an actor in the crisis and an arena where the crisis is covered.

In the crisis management literature, crises have been identified according to typologies, situations, context, phases and decision making (Coombs & Laufer, 2018; Esteves et al., 2024). Crises are unexpected events that can threaten the fundamental values of an organization. Research focuses both on the internal dynamics of a crisis within organizations, and the crisis management related to external stakeholders (Bundy et al., 2016).

In all types of crises there is an increasing public demand for information about the current situation. This information is expected to be provided by public authorities, political institutions, or other actors in society directly involved in the crisis. Citizens expect such information to be delivered rapidly, to be accurate and understandable, and to offer insights into how responsible authorities deal with the situation and plan to act to limit the consequences of the crisis. They also need guidance on how to act to minimize the effects of the crisis.

Crisis communication has been broadly defined as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs, 2010, p. 20). Effective crisis communication has the intention to maintain public confidence in public actors and institutions and basic democratic values are fundamental for public crisis communication.

Crisis management has become a growing field in crisis communication research focusing on how to respond effectively in handling the crisis and eliminate threats to public safety, the environment, or the economy. It is currently conceptualized as a process model that views the crisis and organizational response as a phenomenon that follows

a certain chronological order (Esteves et al., 2024). Researchers investigate distinct stages of crises: preparedness and planning, including the risk assessments of potential crises and measures to minimize the negative effects, different types of crises, crisis management and crisis communication during crises, and post-crisis actions and learning (Coombs & Laufer, 2018).

The crisis management process is often described within a three-phase model of *pre-crisis*, *crisis*, and *post-crisis* measures. The first phase includes signal detection, prevention, and preparation. The second phase covers recognition of the trigger event and response. Finally, the third phase considers action after operations have returned to normal and include providing follow-up information to stakeholders, cooperating with investigations, and learning from the event (Coombs, 2010, p. 22). In all three phases, communication needs to be coordinated efficiently between different actors to establish a common ground for understanding of what is happening, how serious the consequences are, who needs to respond and act, and what measures to take in order to manage the crisis and minimize its effects for the public and society.

## Possible distortions by rumors in the three phases

In this section we show that rumors may appear in all three phases of a crisis: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis.

### Rumors in the pre-crisis phase

Rumors exist even before a real crisis has emerged. Even preparations to avoid a crisis tend to generate rumors of various kinds. If governments or authorities announce new measures, recommendations, or preventions, then people tend to start asking why this is happening right now. In many cases it may be difficult to recognize the real reasons behind the decisions and steps taken, and this uncertainty easily fuels speculations and rumors.

A typical example is when public authorities declare an increasing security threat and risk of terror attacks but do not say exactly why they have come to this conclusion. There may be good reasons not to reveal secret information necessary for combatting threats, but the silence on this topic normally also results in a flood of rumors intended to fill the

information gap. In such situations, the mere gathering of several police cars outside a shopping center easily starts rumors about an ongoing shooting incident or terror attack.

Other rumors may lean more toward conspiracies and claims that specific professional groups in society such as the police, the military, fire brigades, or emergency health care staff have received more detailed information about possible developments but keep this information to themselves to avoid public concern. Rumors are most likely to appear in pre-crisis situations if trust in governmental institutions and actors is low or has been damaged because of past bad crisis management.

### **Rumors in the crisis phase**

The possibilities for crisis communication are best when the crisis unfolds or has just occurred, as many people pay attention to the event and search for information in these moments. At the same time, at this stage, crises are most often characterized by uncertainty and lack of information. This is particularly true when crisis situations are perceived as completely new and have not happened before or at least were not as serious.

Most attention to the relationship between rumors and crisis has, not surprisingly, been paid to the role of rumors during the ongoing crisis phase. Pandemics, financial crises, and nuclear power plant breakdowns often belong to this category. In such cases, it may take some time for public authorities and governments to collect and evaluate reliable and correct information about the current situation. A lack of knowledge of a new virus demands careful considerations before any dramatic decisions about lockdowns or closed borders are taken.

This situation creates information gaps that are easily filled with rumors by individuals or groups that want to make sense of what is going on and fear they will be affected. The diffusion of rumors can also be stimulated by the fact that decision-makers and experts in the field sometimes disagree about appropriate measures to manage the crisis. The combination of uncertainty about possible crisis developments and public concern based on perceived risks on personal or societal levels makes rumors a natural element in contemporary crisis communication.

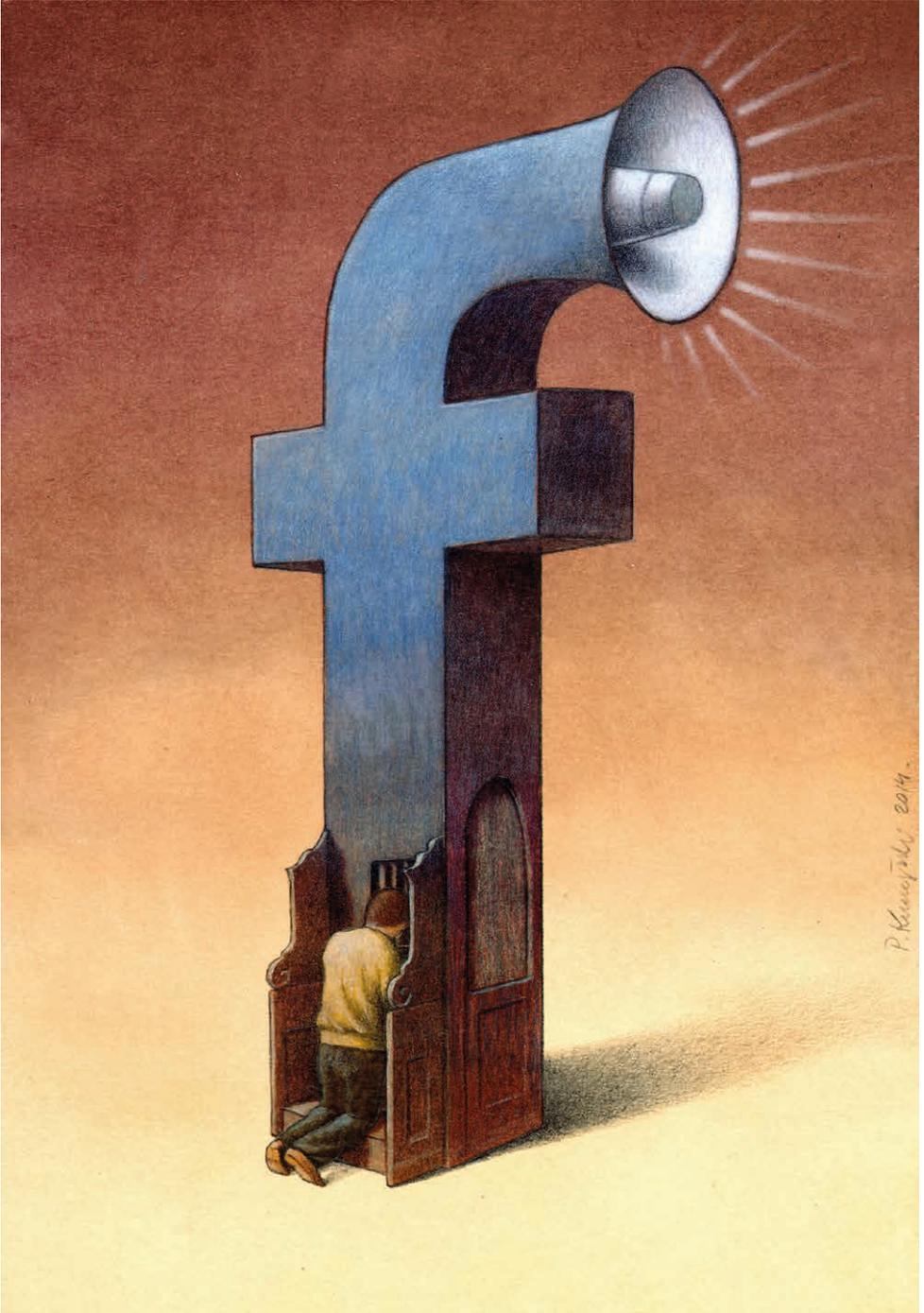
## **Rumors in the post-crisis phase**

Rumors do not stop as soon as the crisis is over. Normally, the post-crisis phase includes evaluations or inquiries around what happened with the intention to learn from the crisis and to be better prepared for future crises of the same kind. Crisis commissions may be appointed to look more closely at how public authorities handled the crisis. The way such commissions are appointed is important for the diffusion of rumors. If the process is not transparent, then rumors may appear, as people suspect that the main task for the commission is to cover up previous mistakes or to retrospectively justify controversial decisions. On the other hand, if the evaluation process is considered to be fair and impartial, then it may decrease rumor diffusion in this phase of the crisis.

Two examples of rumors in the post-crisis phase related to the Swedish context are the murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme in Stockholm 1986 and the shipwreck of the ferry Estonia in the Baltic Sea 1994. The fruitless searches for a murderer and a reasonable explanation why the ferry sank have fueled speculations and rumors over the past several decades. In both cases, crisis commissions and further public investigations cases have not stopped the circulation of unconfirmed claims about what really happened. Even in the 2020s, there is a continuous flow of news articles, books, radio, TV documentaries, websites, and social media communities producing explanations and theories on these events.

## **The challenges of digital media technology**

Rumors can be considered the oldest news medium of all. Even before writing was developed in early civilizations, conversations among human beings transmitted unconfirmed information. Subsequent media developments, such as the introduction of the printed press, radio, and television, have transformed personal communication into mass communication. However, this transformation of communication has hardly influenced the existence of rumors: Now, they have emerged in new forms in print and broadcast media and spread faster than before, reaching more people in a shorter time.



A political cartoon by Pawel Kuczynski, Poland.

The reappearance of rumors in mass media certainly contrasts with the established ideal norms of professional journalism, where fact-checking and various forms of verification in the editorial process are considered to be important parts of journalists' working practices. Previous studies have also confirmed that journalists and editors are aware of the problems with unconfirmed information and try to avoid publishing such material. At the same time, the line between news and rumors is not always clear. Both are exciting and dramatic and attract public interest. To get attention and to reach a larger audience, the news media may sometimes find it reasonable to report stories that are newsworthy and plausible but that have not been fully checked in all aspects.

News organizations also face the challenge of continuous evaluations of whether unconfirmed stories are true or false. If we stick to the idea that everything that is not confirmed by independent sources is false and there is no justification to publish it, then there is a risk that essential information that turns out to be true will not be covered. The Watergate scandal during Richard Nixon's presidency first appeared as rumors, but leading U.S. newspapers decided to investigate the claims further in case they could be confirmed later. While the White House framed the reporting as a vendetta against the president, newspapers that were sympathetic to Nixon hardly mentioned Watergate at all. Ultimately, as the involvement of the Nixon administration was demonstrated the scandal forced Nixon to resign from office.

Contemporary digital media developments, such as the introduction of the Internet and social media platforms, were initially seen as signs of a new era where rumors could be managed more easily. The increased possibilities of instant fact-checking and the continuous flow of news were supposed to eliminate previous voids of information and make rumor diffusion less likely. However, digitalization processes have actually increased the number of rumors in contemporary societies. This phenomenon has not been the result of a lack of information, but rather due to the constant overload of information where people have great problems to discover reliable sources and trustworthy news. The overload of information on digital platforms makes it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction, between what is true and false, and between what is verified news and rumor. It is also worth noting that there is a dynamic interplay between news media and social media in the digital media ecology. News media monitor social media trends closely and mirror the most significant social media debates as they are



People on a train after the assassination of President John F Kennedy.  
Photo by Carl Mydans, LIFE magazine.

presumed to be of great interest for their audiences. At the same time, social media platforms often use news media stories as a starting point for more polarized conversations that spin off in diverse directions. In both cases, the intensified interplay between news media and social media activities may fuel rumors and blur the lines between verified and unverified information.

## Steps to crisis communication in times of rumors and anxiety

Research on rumors and crisis communication has illustrated both the causes and consequences of rumors and has suggested several recommendations to manage rumors in crisis communication. In this section, we present important research results and advice for crisis communication in times of rumor and public concern.

## Enhance awareness to control rumors

A study on hoarding during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that rumors and government lock-down strategies, fear, public concern, and health security significantly affect consumers' buying behaviors (Ali et al., 2023). When rumors increase, hoarding increases. As hoarding causes a shortage of supply and price hikes, and rumors can lead people to replicate the behavior of the majority who buy excessively, it is important that the government enhances the awareness of their audience to control rumors, fear, and anxiety during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain the buying behaviors of consumers. The media plays a key role in this regard: It provides real-time information and influences the actions taken by citizens.

## Avoid information vacuums

The government can increase the spread of rumors by pursuing policies that cause information vacuums (Carlson et al., 2018). In a study of the refugee crisis in Greece in 2016, the authors show that successful crisis

“We argue that governments do not need to actively deceive to produce governance crises or impede policy implementation.” (Carlson, et al., 2018, p. 674.)

management and policy implementation depends on how governments and stakeholders disseminate information (Carlson et al., 2018). Rumors proliferate without being intentionally promoted. When governments are inattentive to information dissemination—perhaps due to incompetence or inexperience—refugees' perceptions and behaviors can be shaped by malicious misinformation and censorship. The researchers state:

*We argue that governments do not need to actively deceive to produce governance crises or impede policy implementation. Even when government pursue policies aimed at stabilizing crises, these choices can backfire, producing an information vacuum, and environment rife with mistrust. In the case of refugee influxes, when governments fail to provide accurate, consistent, and timely information, they exacerbate refugee communities' reliance on rumors and create negative feedback cycles that substantially weaken compliance. (Carlson et al., 2018, p. 674)*

There is a range of common practices from governments that create such information vacuums and fuel rumors: frequent policy shifts, restricted information dissemination, and inconsistent policy implementation. These practices have unanticipated second-order effects that exacerbate the spread of misinformation.

In an environment characterized by high anxiety, low information, and low trust, people actively seek out additional information from unofficial sources and sources that they trust to inform their decisions. These sources include family, friends, and social media. Carlson et al. (2018) report that asylum seekers can more easily and consistently access information from smugglers than from government officials and aid workers through social media sites, text messages, and phone calls.

## **Rumor correction in social media is enhanced by education and connective sense-breaking**

Rumors gain significant attention in social media while rumor corrections largely do not. When rumors are false, they can influence people's decision-making and action in a negative way with severe consequences. Because rumors can threaten the sense-making process and cause negative effects including casualties when people construct meaning based on rumors, there is a need to successfully diffuse rumor corrections to disrupt the apparent "logic" of the original rumor (Mirbabaie et al., 2022).

Rumor-spreading networks emerge spontaneously as a reaction to events that trigger crises. When individuals feel the need to bridge knowledge gaps, they turn to social media and often use digital network mechanisms such as creating or forwarding hashtags and forwarding social media posts. In this way, they engage in connective sense-making and may contribute to spread or correct rumors. To correct rumors, new environmental aspects and information that contradicts the previous meaning individuals have constructed are important to ensure sense-breaking of the original rumor.

In crisis situations, emergency management agencies and crisis communicators can encourage social media users to contribute to connective sense-breaking, that is to participate in rumor correction by using the following strategies:

1. Communicate their goals openly (to correct rumors) and incentivize individuals for participation
2. Use more personal action frames—that is, frame the idea of participation in rumor correction as easy
3. Introduce personalized action frames in the form of hashtags to coordinate and direct information around topics
4. Provide clues on how to identify unverified rumors (that stem from ambiguous sources)

In this way, the usage of hashtags provide a way to bridge networks so that users engage in either correcting or supporting rumors. One successful example is the #mythbuster hashtag that allowed the Queensland police to effectively counter rumors and misinformation during the local floods (Mirbabaie et al., 2022).

According to Oh et al. (2018), source ambiguity, which is information with no clear source provided, is the greatest cause of rumors, ahead of personal involvement and anxiety. Too many situational reports with ambiguous or no information sources is a sign that rumor mills are being constructed. It may be a strong signal that people are desperately searching for and sharing information through their social networks.

Emergency responders and crisis communicators are important sense-making and sense-breaking agents and are recommended to make extra efforts to distribute unambiguous, reliable localized information to control public concern and suppress rumor spread. If this is not done, then the collective information processing of people is likely to encourage rumors. Timely, localized, and correct information through multiple trusted communication channels is strongly recommended. By communicating corrections as a goal and educating users on how to identify trusted sources, crisis communicators can significantly engage the public in connective sense-breaking that contributes to correcting rumors.

## **Why government debunking fails – use empathy to address people’s concerns**

During crises, government actions must be aligned with public needs and expectations. Emotional dynamics play a significant role in public responses to rumor debunking. Accordingly, in addition to factual information, crisis communication should actively address the emotional dimensions of public sentiment by prioritizing empathy and acknowledgement of emotions, and by acknowledging uncertainty by adopting measured language that illustrates that the crisis situation is difficult to predict. This avoids direct confrontation and criticizing those spreading rumors, tactics that can be counterproductive (Ding & Ge, 2024). The research on rumor debunking is growing. Rumors that are debunked early and vehemently by official sources are the most likely to be stopped (Jung et al., 2021).

A less confrontational approach, characterizing rumors as “misunderstandings,” allows for a more constructive dialogue and builds trust. By choosing dialogue over dismissal of rumors, there is more space for genuine engagement and the productive exchange of information, even during situations characterized by skepticism or criticism.

Ding and Ge (2024) highlight that authoritarian regimes face particular challenges in managing rumors during public crises due to communication that is rejected, reinterpreted, disregarded, or opposed. These four communicative factors culminate in a core mechanism of “Emotional Resistance Anchored in Distrust,” highlighting how negative past experiences shape public distrust and foster resistance to government communication.

## **Watchful waiting is a successful strategy to minimize and manage rumors and fake news**

Lambert et al. (2024) list the best practices to reduce the chances of rumors and fake news and manage rumors and fake news. These strategies include preparing for a situation characterized by rumors and fake news by monitoring influencers, imagining plausible scenarios, minimizing criticism through direct messaging, and using environmental scanning and listening online.



A political cartoon by Riber Hansson, Sweden.

The best practices to manage a situation characterized by rumors or fake news is to analyze conversations, to engage stakeholders, to change the narrative via owned channels, to manage relationships with credible media, and to address the sources of rumors and fake news. Responding to and engaging stakeholders can draw more attention to the rumors or fake news and result in aggravating the crisis. Relying on credible sources and directly addressing the source within the same channel are recommended to avoid spreading rumors or fake news.

## **Rumors of additional violence on social media during emergency situations**

Campus attacks, such as school shootings, are becoming more frequent, and in similar emergency situations, information is often distorted and misinterpreted, leaving students with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and vulnerability (Lindstadt et al., 2020). When crisis-related uncertainty persists, rumors are rapidly spread via social media. Rumors about additional violence that are incorrect have been shown to appear in similar emergency situations. The ability to manage the crisis becomes more difficult if the crisis-managing organization stays silent. Communication vacuums are quickly filled by informal sources and emotionally fueled narratives. Those that are incorrect and illegitimate can potentially gain dominance. Organizations need to intentionally disseminate information about the crisis in an honest and timely manner.

## **People believe fact-based rumors more than subjective rumors**

In an experimental study on food poisoning, Nekmat and Kong (2019) find that undergraduate students believe fact-based rumors more than rumors that make subjective claims. Based on this belief, they attribute greater responsibility to the organization for the crisis. Consequently, an organization's crisis communication strategies should focus on debunking fact-based rumors rather than subjective ones. However, this recommendation is contrary to what has been shown in prior studies, namely that debunking online rumors can backfire and produce negative effects.

Further, the impact of rumors is mediated by one's belief in the rumors. When people believe rumors, they blame organizations and develop more negative attitudes toward the organization. Personal involvement in a crisis leads to more negative attitudes and a greater tendency to blame the organization. This does not mean that involvement in the crisis affects the believability of online rumors. Rather, people's tendency to believe online rumors during a period of crisis uncertainty is largely a rational process, dependent on the veracity and plausibility of the claims made in the rumor.

## When people believe rumors are true, they spread and act upon them

Rumors can lead to behavioral changes on a large scale if people believe they are true. This was shown in a study on the population displacement in India in 2012, when more than 15,000 people fled their homes believing threatening false rumors that violent attacks would be directed against people of Northeast Indian descent (Oh et al., 2018). During extreme uncertainty and ambiguity, potential victims may not know if a rumor is true without receiving information and secure evidence from authorities.

The type of message in the rumor narrative that is circulated will impact behavior. Plausibility of a threat that is salient to mortality can result in extreme safety-seeking behaviors of individuals in a community. If the rumor is consistent with the beliefs of the targeted community, then it can become more plausible. Further, without dissenting voices, counter-narratives and "defeatist beliefs" do not surface. Life-threatening rumors can cause extreme public concern, resulting in a danger-control response rather than a fear-control response, leading to safety-seeking and self-preserving actions among the affected population.

During a pressing crisis situation, technological characteristics of the medium where the rumor is spread such as *synchronicity* and *richness of expression* may influence whether the recipients believe that the rumors are plausible. Synchronous feedback exchanges allow communicators to verify unsubstantiated rumor messages. When they are missing, the rumor may be believed to be plausible. People also trust audiovisual material with greater detail of expression because it has a greater resemblance to the real world. Rumor messages including videos are more credible than less nuanced media such as audio or text-based messages.

When people realize that a rumor is false, they are significantly less likely to forward the rumor to others. People who believe a life-threatening rumor are more prone to inform others and to take action to seek safety. The magnitude of the threat can trigger extreme collective safety-seeking behaviors (people rush to leave their own community under threat) rather than preferring moderate actions (checking for their safety or staying at home without going outside) or taking no action at all. Hence, governments and emergency agencies need to mitigate potential harm in crisis-stricken communities by debunking and controlling rumors. When a rumor message is criticized, the probability that people forward it to others decreases significantly. It is necessary to report facts that deny a harmful rumor's claims to curb that rumor.

An essential principle of crisis management is to disclose correct information as quickly as possible.

In complex, connected information and communication technology environments, it is important for crisis responders to circulate facts promptly and as widely as possible. This behavior is likely to refute the false rumor information and to provide citizens with timely, localized, and correct information through multiple channels such as websites, social networks, radio, and TV.

An essential principle of crisis management is to disclose correct information as quickly as possible. Community leaders should be proactive in mitigating the potential damage that harmful rumors can lead to in a community during a crisis situation such as ethnic conflicts, social uprisings, natural disasters and terrorist attacks. When leaders neglect internal communication during a crisis, there is an increase in rumors.

When management and leaders do not fulfill employees' needs for information during a crisis, employees will create their own beliefs, based upon their interpretation of the situation and this may strengthen a dysfunctional culture (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). A case of fraud committed by an employee in a municipality may result in gossip and rumors, creating divisions and distrust among managers. When managers communicate the same information to the employees as they give to the media, they fulfill the media's need for information, but employees experience a lack of information. This void produces internal insecurity, and management may either be unaware of or actively ignore the narratives circulating among the employees. This situation divides with mutual distrust and a lack of communication.

Research illustrates that to be successful in internal crisis communication, managers must be able to listen to their employees, improvise, and be aware of their employees' needs for sense-making. Leaders develop their communicative competence continuously over time; this process starts long before a crisis arrives. Indeed, the ability to deal with a crisis depends on the structures and competence that are developed before any such situation arrives.

When employees lack information, they often become active in spreading rumors to make sense of the situation. In this situation, crisis management needs to be active in communicating internally in such a way that employees feel well informed and confident in how they get the formal information and answers they need to reduce their anxiety and confusion. Communicating with those who are personally affected and those who need to understand what is happening is vital during a crisis for the trust to be sustained and for employees to understand. If rumors and false information circulate among the employees, more information is critical to manage the crisis and reduce any collateral damage. In addition, it is imperative to frame the information in a way that is recognized by the employees. Otherwise, it will produce both internal insecurity within the organization and block organizational post-crisis learning (Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016).

## Lessons learned – A summary

As we have illustrated in the previous section, there is a solid research base providing recommendations for crisis communication during times of anxiety and rumors. Here we summarize the lessons learned.

### **Enhance awareness to control rumors**

Situational knowledge and awareness are key to managing public concern and minimizing the spreading of rumors. There is a widespread belief that people cannot manage anxiety. On a group level, people can deal with anxiety and still act in a rational way.

### **Avoid information vacuums**

Information is vital for crisis management. Information vacuums need to be filled by public authorities to limit influence from other actors and avoid increased diffusion of rumors and misperceptions. Policies that create information vacuums, for example to refrain from communicating altogether or delaying communication, will result in an increase in the spreading of rumors.

### **Engage in rumor correction**

To correct rumors, new environmental aspects and information that contradicts the previous meanings individuals constructed are important to enhance sense-making and ensure the sense-breaking of the rumor.

### **Provide timely, localized and correct information**

Timely, localized, and correct information through multiple trusted communication channels is strongly recommended. This will enhance trust, which is the most fundamental value in crisis management.

### **Use empathy and address people's practical concerns**

Crisis communication needs not only to convey factual information but also actively address the emotional dimensions of public sentiment by prioritizing empathy and acknowledgement of feelings. Addressing people's concerns is critical in crisis situations.

### **Use a “watchful waiting” approach to discover rumors**

The best practices in crisis communication that minimizes rumors are monitoring influencers, planning for scenarios, minimizing criticism through direct messaging, using environmental scanning and listening online.

### **Distorted and misinterpreted information needs to be managed**

The ability to manage the crisis becomes more difficult if the crisis managing organization stays silent. Incorrect and illegitimate messages can potentially gain dominance if they are met by silence.

### **Fact-based rumors are more trusted than subjective rumors**

Organizations should focus their crisis communication strategies on debunking rumors. It is important to provide correct facts to counter fact-based rumors.

### **Credible rumors are spread and acted upon**

When people realize that a rumor is false, they are significantly less likely to forward the rumor to others. People who believe a life-threatening rumor are more prone to inform others and take action to seek safety.

### **Leaders need to address internal stakeholders to avoid rumors**

Internal communication must fulfill internal stakeholders' needs of information during a crisis; otherwise, they will create their own truth.

## CASE STUDIES:

### Rumors, public concern and crisis communication

In this section, we present some cases of rumors, public concern, and crisis communication that illustrate the role of rumors during crises, and the importance of including a strategy on how to manage rumors when planning and managing crisis communication.

#### **A pandemic and an overload of information**

The first news accounts seemed innocent. Reports mentioned a few people falling ill from an unexplained lung disease in two isolated rural villages in Southeast Asia. At first, the diagnosis was uncertain. Understandably, few in the West paid much attention until the national health authorities arranged a press conference to discuss the matter. Even then, however, only a few members of the international press corps took notice. Doctors reported that over the past few days the number of infected people had increased dramatically, and that the illness was spreading hour by hour. Laboratory tests had confirmed that the infections were caused by a completely unknown infectious agent, a novel virus. To be sure, this was a report from a Third World nation without sophisticated diagnostic equipment. Still, medical experts admitted they were puzzled by the rapid spread of the disease and the aggressive nature of the virus. Soon, the outbreak became breaking news and was picked up by the global media and started to spread via digital media, creating fears that were concerning to those responsible for public health.

The hope that the outbreak would be confined to these distant villages soon proved in vain. On the contrary, the number of infected people continued to increase exponentially, and a few cases were reported from neighboring Southeast Asian countries. The development, coming on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, was followed by intense reporting around the globe as the virus spread. TV stations broadcast images of chaotic scenes outside crowded hospitals and people protesting limited medical resources and the lack of treatment for people in urgent need of intensive health care. Many were dying of this mysterious ailment. What started as a local health problem was now a global problem, and citizens demanded more compassionate political leadership and more effective political actions. Medical experts remained puzzled about the character of the new virus and its ability to diffuse so quickly, but there was also controversy among experts with diverging opinions about what steps to take next. Within two weeks, a local concern had developed into an international crisis.

The outbreak of the disease was at first perceived as an isolated event with limited global consequences. However, national borders are ineffective barriers in the modern world. Health authorities in North America and Europe soon reported their first cases, mainly from those who had flown in from the infected region. Despite rigorous efforts to isolate them and test everyone coming in from abroad, many countries had to admit after a few days that they observed domestic diffusion of the new virus. The global spread was soon characterized as a pandemic by health organizations throughout the world, and national governments imposed strict lockdowns and other heavy restrictions to control the situation. As nobody knew for sure how dangerous the virus was, despite the increasing death toll, governments defended their tough policies as necessary safety precautions. In general, the public accepted the restrictions at first and adapted to the new situation, even if small groups of citizens claimed that their basic rights were threatened by the governmental decisions.

The absence of accurate information and a scientific consensus gradually became a larger problem day by day. There was no doubt that the virus could spread extremely rapidly, but there were many doubts and much confusion about how dangerous the virus would be. Was everyone at risk? Was this an extinction event? Nobody really knew, but many speculated about possible effects for various nations. Epidemiologists and economists offered conflicting forecasts about the challenges ahead. Calculations of death rates and economic dislocations became headline news. The pandemic now hit every country (even if some autocracies did not admit it), but nobody knew how long it would last. Frustration and desperation were common in public debate, where both politicians and business leaders could argue that it was “necessary to end this pandemic now!” At the same time, the global population step by step realized that there was no existing cure, but only scattered hopes that an effective vaccine might be produced within a decade.

In contrast to previous health crises, the main problem this time was the extreme overload of information and the difficulties for people navigating between verified and unverified claims. The new and terrifying situation triggered substantial anxiety among people around the globe. The public was asking many questions, but few accurate answers were given. Information from public authorities and governments in the initial weeks was vague and fragmented. Public recommendations went back and forth, and statements from public officials were not easy to interpret. One day it was enough to stand one meter apart from

another person, but the next day two meters were recommended. In one country masks were mandatory in public areas, while in other countries masks were perceived as more or less useless. Traditional media and social media were both overloaded by sensational stories of unexpected recovery cases, peoples' personal experiences of health care shortcomings and a large amount of unverified information.

In the absence of secure and trustworthy facts, people—as usual—wanted to understand what has happened and why, and who was to blame. Consequently, in most nations hit by the pandemic, ordinary people filled the existing information gaps by searching among alternative explanations and theories that seemed to shed new and persuasive light on the dramatic situation.

Even though a future pandemic had been forecasted by many experts, the current one surprised everyone. The question of how this could happen got no accurate answer, and the lack of definitive reasons fueled a flood of rumors. From the beginning, the most likely explanation seemed to be that the virus had emerged in a food market from live animals for sale and spread to humans. As this theory about the origin of the outbreak was not officially confirmed, alternative scenarios emerged with claims that serious mistakes had been made in medical laboratories. Even more enticing and troublesome stories circulated about a possible viral attack initiated by intelligence services in hostile countries. As nothing could be confirmed or denied, rumors about the origin of the pandemic continued.

The most critical issue during the pandemic outbreak was the human consequences of the virus. People were concerned about how dangerous it was and what could be done to avoid infection. Unfortunately, there was a lack of scientific knowledge—and consensus—on these topics. Advice from medical experts was often vague, or in some cases directly contradictory. Even if it gradually became clear that it was an air-borne infection, controversies emerged about how to keep one's distance from other people and whether wearing masks was effective. As people got infected unpredictably, new ideas about virus diffusion patterns appeared. Some of the rumors around diffusion claimed that it could be dangerous to pick up the daily mail as infected people might have touched it. Other rumors focused on how long the virus could survive on different surfaces. Finally, as some people seemed to be more immune than others and some countries less hit by the pandemic than others, rumors were spread that race or ethnicity could explain these differences.

The second issue that people were most concerned about was the lack of a cure and effective medical treatments. It was clear from the very beginning that this was a novel virus and that no relevant medicines or treatments existed. A vaccine might be expected within a decade with luck, according to health authorities. This depressing news resulted in a continuous search for hope, and information flows were soon filled with stories about diverse miracle medicines and anecdotes of sick people who had recovered quickly after unconventional treatments. None of these stories could be verified or confirmed but rumors continued to spread about the efficiency of unconventional cures. Many rumors circulated about specific eating and drinking habits that might reduce the possibilities of getting infected. As there was no real success in providing people with an effective vaccine, rumors about miracle cures continued to circulate, especially via social media.

Not surprisingly, health care organizations, hospitals, and homes for elderly people were ill-prepared to face the pandemic. Reports circulated about chaotic situations, a lack of protections for health care personnel, and a lack of space for the huge increase of patients in need of intensive health care. The problems exposed and the lack of accurate information about local health capabilities fueled rumors about the existence of hidden agendas where older people had to die to make room for younger patients and about intentional relocation of medical resources from homes for older people to hospitals.

The main arenas for diffusion of rumors during different stages of the pandemic were social media, while legacy media were more careful about promoting unverified information.

The main arena for the diffusion of rumors during different stages of the pandemic was social media, while legacy media was more careful about promoting unverified information. The news media fact-checking procedures worked most

of the time. Nevertheless, the most common rumors circulating via social media were mentioned in the press and on the radio and TV. The interplay between news media and social media has many different dimensions and one of them relates to the fact that established forms of media are regularly considered to be supportive of public authorities, trying to hide the brutal truth about the pandemic by producing fake news. In today's fragmented media landscape where individual media diets vary significantly, it becomes difficult to distinguish false and accurate information and to combat rumors.

In the final stage, when new vaccines were eventually introduced, the character of the rumors changed. While the vaccines were reviewed positively and trusted by most people, others remained skeptical. As always with medical treatments, the risk of side effects was impossible to eliminate completely. This formed a basis for new rumors that the rapid development of new vaccines could be explained by commercial interests from the big medical industry companies. Thus, some people claimed that the approval process had been less rigorous than usual, and the vaccine was perceived by them to be dangerous. In some cases, even more dramatic rumors were spread that the vaccine was composed by elements that were aimed at taking control of peoples' minds.

## The controversial Nobel Prize decision

The decision of the Royal Swedish Academy to award the Nobel Prize in Literature to a controversial author who was highly critical of Islam garnered significant international attention. While the decision was praised in Western democracies, it sparked violent demonstrations in the Islamic world with thousands of participants, where books by the awarded author were being burned in the streets along with the Swedish flag. After a few days, several governments in the Middle East called for a boycott of Swedish goods, and prominent religious leaders declared that attacking Swedish targets and interests is legitimate in retaliation for the Academy's decision.

The protests against the prize escalated in intensity, and criticism of Sweden grew. The government attempted to calm the situation by explaining that it is not responsible for the decision and that Sweden is a country with religious freedom and does not have an official stance on religious matters. However, the criticism persisted and intensified. After a few days, the government held a press conference in collaboration with the police and security agencies, announcing that the terrorism threat level was being raised due to the recent developments. The press conference also revealed that some threats against the country had already been averted, but no details about these incidents were disclosed.

Before the press conference concluded, rumors started spreading through text messages and social media about what prompted the decision to raise the terrorism threat level. There were reports of a major police operation at a shopping center, other claims of incidents at a large music festival, and further speculations about the timing of a football match being adjusted for public safety. All of these reports consistently related to the heightened terrorism threat level dominating the news coverage but lacked concrete references to official sources or established news outlets. Instead, the sourcing was weak, often relying on distant acquaintances or vague secondhand information.

The rumors quickly gained traction, and representatives of the government and authorities were confronted with these claims. They chose not to comment or confirm the reports, citing that the information about what happened was classified due to national security concerns. In the short term, this led to more widespread rumor spreading, although it eventually subsided when the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that the Peace Prize was awarded to a non-denominational citizen movement in a Muslim-majority country, shifting all attention to our Western neighbor.

## **Volcano eruption in tourist paradise during big holiday**

The Canary Islands are a popular holiday resort for people from the European continent. The islands are well known as a safe place, particularly popular among families and with more sun hours than any other place in reasonable distance for European visitors during the winter season. Less known is the fact that the Canary Islands are also volcano islands.

Early one Sunday morning in February, there were news reports about a sudden volcanic eruption on the largest of the Canary Islands, Tenerife. During the first hours it was clear that large areas of the island were affected by the eruption, and there were reports about property damage caused by the lava flows, ash clouds, and other volcanic hazards. Local authorities soon also confirmed the loss of life in some regions and the fact that many people had been taken to the hospital for immediate treatment.

The volcanic eruption caused considerable damage to infrastructure all over the island. Roads, buildings, and power lines were destroyed, and the large tourist hotels on the island became isolated from public transport systems and lacked electricity. The air and sea transportation system, crucial for the tourist industry, broke down completely as it was impossible to use airports and harbors.

Many European governments soon realized that they had thousands of citizens on vacation on the island during the volcanic eruption. The official information provided by the Spanish authorities was initially limited and contradictory. The island was isolated from the rest of the world. Mobile telephones and Internet connections worked temporarily, but it was not easy to confirm messages of the event.

Rumors about the effects of the volcanic eruption spread quickly due to the widespread use of social media and the Internet. Misinformation and speculation fueled these rumors, which were difficult to verify or refute. In some cases, exaggerations and catastrophic scenarios caused anxiety among residents and tourists, and complicated the efforts of authorities to provide accurate information and coordinate emergency responses.

The authorities underlined the importance of relying on official sources for information about potential natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, and asked people to avoid spreading unverified rumors or speculation. However, a lot of unverified information continued to circulate and fill the news vacuum during the first days

of the crisis. When people were anxious or uncertain about a situation, they turned to rumors as a way of trying to make sense of what was happening. Rumors provided a sense of clarity or explanation, even if they were not entirely accurate or reliable. Anxiety also made people more susceptible to misinformation and false rumors. When people feel anxious or stressed, they are more likely to accept rumors at face value without critically evaluating their accuracy or reliability.

## **Bank collapse in small state becomes a global financial crisis**

The collapse of a big bank in Liechtenstein created a financial crisis that had significant impacts both locally and internationally. Liechtenstein is a small country with a population of around 38,000 people, but it is known for its large financial sector, which accounts for a sizable portion of its economy. The collapse of this major bank led to a loss of general confidence in the financial system, which triggered a chain reaction of bankruptcies, defaults, and financial instability throughout Europe.

One of the most immediate impacts of the bank collapse in Liechtenstein was the loss of customer deposits, which caused a ripple effect throughout the financial system. Depositors suddenly lost their life savings, and businesses went bankrupt, leading to job losses and economic recession. The government also faced significant challenges in trying to stabilize the financial system, as it did not have the resources or capacity to manage such a crisis.

Rumors about the bank collapse in Liechtenstein spread quickly, fueled by peoples' worries and concerns. Social media and the Internet amplified these rumors, leading to anxiety among residents and investors. Anxiety fueled people's fears and suspicions, leading them to spread rumors as a way of warning others or seeking validation for their own concerns. This created a feedback loop where anxiety drove the development of rumors, which in turn fueled more anxiety and uncertainty. Overall, anxiety contributed to the development of rumors by creating a climate of uncertainty and fear, fueling people's suspicions and fears, and making them more vulnerable to misinformation.

Of course, not all rumors were based on verified information. To overcome the crisis, it was crucial for the public to rely on credible sources and expert analysis to assess the situation and understand its potential impacts. As in all times of crisis, remaining calm and following official guidance was crucial, at least as long as these sources remained credible.

## MANAGING RUMORS

In the third part of the book, we focus on how to deal and live with rumors. We examine the phenomenon of rumor mills and their distinct phases, as well as how they emerge in different types of crises that typically involve the spreading of rumors, including disease outbreaks, terror attacks, and wildfires. Following this part, we include four scenarios for crisis communication preparation.

Responsible agencies and politicians must conduct crisis management and communication in the event of emergencies and crises, such as war. This can involve quickly preparing statements about an ongoing event. In such situations, each authority has its own mission and area of responsibility. In the event of emergencies and crises, it is sometimes unclear who is responsible for communicating. It is therefore important that agencies and other important actors, such as municipalities, have conducted training, planning, and practicing. It is also important that agencies and other actors work together beforehand with planning and evidence-based knowledge so that they are prepared when a crisis breaks out. It is not enough just to collaborate; the work must be focused on being able to conduct coordinated activities before, during, and after a crisis. It is of the utmost importance that agencies that are responsible for an activity in normal situations also do so in a crisis. In the event of an outbreak of an infectious disease, financial turbulence, or war, authorities take the lead together with responsible politicians. An incident should also be handled where it occurred to the extent possible. Oftentimes, crisis communication is more fluid because many organizations are involved. Citizens rarely see the whole picture; rather, they receive part of the situation based on what is communicated by the authorities. Each part of a crisis changes over time. It can start with first responders initiating crisis communication and then an agency makes a statement on a specific issue, which then takes on a political dimension. Letting those who are responsible and closest to the emergency or crisis

handle the situation is desirable because they are often the best prepared and most credible actors. The authorities and other actors who must handle the situation should, to the greatest extent possible, behave in the way they conduct their business under normal situations, even if resource and reinforcements are called in.

It can be challenging to know how rumors should be handled within a system of agencies, other actors, and politicians. For thousands of years, leaders and administrations have been unable to control rumors, and surely this will continue to be the case. The most important task authorities have in controlling rumors is that they should have the knowledge and experience to recognize what a rumor is and how it evolves. The most effective way to manage and combat rumors is to handle the emergency and the crisis that has arisen that has led to the spread of uncertain information. Inevitably, fighting a rumor serves to spread it, so care is warranted in preventing its public from believing the false claim.

If the rumors are harmful, leading to negative outcomes, agencies and politicians must engage in crisis communication to reach citizens and other actors. However, repeating rumors can be dangerous. The best way is to educate, train, exercise, and follow rumors in the agency's communication departments and in the operations room.

There is of course a great advantage if many communicators and those who have worked with preparedness are aware of rumors. This facilitates understanding and reduces the problems that rumors cause when they steal attention from those with secure and helpful information. Knowledge about rumors must be conveyed and spread like everything else. Unfortunately, rumors have been perceived negatively for thousands of years because of their factual uncertainty and because they have the ability to shine a spotlight on a problem or an unresolved issue. Rumors also have a function in investigative journalism. Their uncertain claims to accuracy give rise to conversation, debate and, above all, a flood of questions that demand quick answers. The presence of rumors proves that people have a strong desire to know what is happening in their world.

## Circulated rumors: The first free-of-charge news service

Throughout human history, people have wanted to know about the latest news. This relational, circulated news process of information—and rumor—has been going on for as long as humans have communicated with each other. Given that rumors are free and create much interest, they generate a lot of engagement and participation. In the beginning, this process involved warning each other of dangers or conveying answers to insistent questions. So far, no technology has succeeded in competing with the ways that rumors convey content that captures interest, convinces us, and makes us believe what we hear.

The news process involved in the circulation of rumors has shaped us and is evident in our curiosity. It has also contributed to how we react to certain types of information. Rumors reveal how leaders have reacted when faced with uncertain information and force answers to difficult questions. This is still true today when we confront agencies, companies, and organizations as well as politicians who want to control the content of what we communicate. What is striking is how today's leading politicians and agencies rely on rumors just as much as in the past. Many government officials try to deal with them but have so far not fully succeeded in cracking the code of rumor management.

Rumors have contributed to both good and bad environments within the field of communication. That was how it was meant to be. Nevertheless, information is power, and being told the truth or a lie and believing it can be fatal. Because of their low cost, rumors will never stop because of the easy access to them.

## Rumors always come back

Every year, farmers use chemical means to fight invasive plants or insects that eat their crops. The plants and insects return the following year and the fight is repeated. The farmer must learn to live with the fact that the unwelcome plants and insects will be the same next year. Fighting rumors is like the problem that farmers face. Rumors return, although not in the same place, and perhaps with a different content but a similar form. Rumors appear regularly without us being able to predict them.

It is impossible to kill rumors completely. An idea or thought cannot easily be destroyed. They can be reduced in strength for a time. However, unpleasant claims that suggest solutions can be just as annoying if they are also plausible. The best antidote is to learn what rumors are and how they arise, but this is not an easy task, and a checklist rarely solves the problem.

## Dealing with rumors and living with them

Rumors are not predictable, which means that they can establish themselves as news. It is impossible to predict whether rumors will arise during an event or in the aftermath of it even if the situation is well controlled.

A crisis management organization should have basic knowledge of what rumors are and what they can accomplish. An organization that assumes that rumors are false and that they must be managed and fought at all costs has already embraced a problematic approach. Usually, agencies and other actors start looking for a source of rumors, a difficult undertaking. At the same time, responsible representatives often do not notice how they have been seduced by rumors as they drop all other activities, instead of managing the crisis.

There is a longstanding and well-established belief that it is possible to defeat rumors that circulate. This belief leads to problems for those affected. One could compare the fight of authorities against rumors to an exorcism. The difficulty is when the fight against the rumors is rendered as a victory in a battle. However, rumors rarely write the story of society: The self-proclaimed victor does. Rumors keep coming back in a similar guise to everyone's surprise. Sometimes they are met with resistance when they are discovered, but most rumors spread their claims and then disappear without a fight.

How should a private person, communication officer, journalist, doctor, corporate director, or politician—to name a few—understand rumors? No one, regardless of education, is immune to rumors. Everyone can get carried away, regardless of what the rumors convey. The most important thing is to learn about the function, origin, and constant return of rumors.

## We spread rumors before we recognize them

We often want to be among the first to hear insider information about something that interests us. The rumors that gain traction are those that are persuasive, which we can rarely defend ourselves against because what they convey can either be completely accurate or completely lacking in substance. Dismissing rumors as false is often the first mistake. Instead, a rumor should be perceived as unconfirmed information that emerges from an unclear situation that lacks an authoritative source. An intriguing reality is that we start talking about rumors and then become spreaders of them because we want to relay insider information. Only afterwards do we try to bring order to what is communicated.

## We want to be involved – but we cannot manage it

Rumors are phenomena with which we often do not know how to deal. Sometimes, you can ask yourself if you should start dealing with it at all when we do not know what the consequences might be. Rumors are difficult to understand and explain because they violate established rules and perceptions. Many people hope that information will be easy to assess and judge as to whether it is true or false and whether it can be traced to a trusted source. However, whoever dissects rumors must use other insights to understand their ability to capture interest and encourage people to believe them.

Emergencies and crises are often surrounded by uncertainty, which can manifest itself in several ways. Two nearly identical situations can play out differently. The first event can be managed without any communicative significance. The second may get a lot of attention and the discussion may last for a longer period. As a result, it is difficult to assess how emergencies and crises unfold and what type of crisis communication is needed. There are several factors that influence this.

If a major news story is reported, it can draw attention away from another event. Nevertheless, one should not expect that rumors will decrease or will not arise even if an event is initially overshadowed by other crises. There are examples of how organizations have conducted careful crisis communication without it being responded to deeply. Any agency responsible for crisis communication must consider the worst possible outcomes, including those in which parallel rumors may spread.



A political cartoon by KAL, Kevin Kallaughter, United States.

Waiting for action creates prime conditions for rumors to arise, a lesson that all organizations must learn. Hence, the most crucial factor for crisis communication is to convey information rapidly. Moreover, the information that is provided must be correct. These two important perspectives are not opposed to each other. Speed is about conveying that the emergency or crisis is being taken seriously and that all available resources have been deployed to help those affected. The best approach is to provide crisis communication quickly and then follow up with more content.

Confusion can either disappear or inflate. We must assume that in an emergency or crisis, all eyes will be directed toward the focus of the incident and those who are responsible for handling it. In that situation, as in many others, people want to know what is happening and how it affects them. These are completely legitimate questions that must receive fast and correct answers. The public often asks reasonable questions to which they demand fast and correct answers. Of course, it is not easy for crisis management agencies to answer all questions directly when they themselves are trying to determine what has happened. In this situation, rumors with their convincing claims may ensnare victims as well as those responsible.

When events arise that overwhelm our everyday lives, people start talking to each other, search for news, and examine social media. The authorities are largely dependent on how the media reports the news because it represents the information carriers who have channels that reach a broad swath of the population. At this point, the agencies provide crisis communication, which can be brief or more detailed, depending on the conditions.

## Rumors – a recycled phenomenon

The following section examines the phenomenon of rumor mills. A rumor mill reflects the fabrication and dissemination of a rumor, and its ongoing process of impact.

### How rumors appear

Rumors circulate and then return. Sometimes, a mill can stop when the wind stops. Rumors do the same thing. However, as soon as the wind comes back, the mill starts spinning again. This metaphor highlights the contrast when rumors are in a state of low and high intensity. Rumors always exist but have variable spread and impact. There is no easy way to know whether a crisis will receive less or more attention in the news media. In the same way, the impact of rumors cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, in phase 1 of a crisis, rumors exist and occur at a low intensity. In phase 2, rumors have a significant impact and spread widely, and then go into the shadows and wait for the next impact or change to fit the current situation. Rumors cannot be killed as some believe; rather, they live in an eternal wheel.

Knowing that rumors are a part of most situations means that we must understand how rumors operate, learn to recognize them, be prepared for their impact in the ongoing communication, and that they are difficult to combat. A crisis communication organization must be aware of the diversity of rumors and not be driven by beliefs that rumors are always false and planned. The most critical point is not to fall into the trap of feeding rumors to give them more attention. We must live side by side with rumors even if they sometimes prove more powerful than we would prefer.

## Impact and correlation model

Crisis communication is in constant motion—it changes as the shape of a crisis changes—and it is not possible to determine in advance whether it will work effectively. In the event of major accidents, for example, the police and rescue services may have the primary responsibility for communicating to the public and media. At the same time, the urgent issue has a major impact on the digital media platforms where more actors get to react quickly. A short time later, the hospital service and municipality will have the responsibility for conducting crisis communication to the public. At this point, experts and researchers may give their views on the incident that occurred. After a few hours, the government makes its entrance and holds a press conference, which is commented on by opinion leaders. This is not surprising: In a democracy, freedom of speech and the exchange of opinions should have impact even when society is under pressure. At times, this can be perceived as divisive. The main thing is that those responsible for the crisis should give answer without limiting openness. In these situations, rumors often emerge from several directions and compete in the communications arena.

Rumors are already present to varying degrees in people's consciousness. In our three-phase model, we intend to describe how they exist in everyday situations, expand during crises, and remain in our subconscious after a crisis to subside, where they can be quickly reactivated as necessary. These three phases describe how rumors occur before, during, and after a crisis. Rumors are in constant circulation in people's conversations, social media, and other contexts. We spread rumors without being aware of it because they are embedded in our conversations. Rumors can be short side comments in conversations or can be a topic of conversation without us defining our talk as sharing rumors. Some are spread further and adds an extra dimension in what is being discussed. The same type of story often arises in several conversations at the same time, which they also did before we had neither telephones, media nor digital platforms. A fire, for example, could be seen as arson, the basis for rumor now as in the past.

**PHASE 1.** The example that a fire could be arson is something we hardly talk about when there are no fires happening at the moment. As soon as a fire starts, the thought emerges and we start talking about it as well as several other perspectives about fires. Even if we have never experienced arson in our local community, rumors have been in our consciousness since our birth. Rumors may appear in everyday conversations when we meet a person who lives near a place where a large fire has burned. Like adults, young people learn that some fires may be maliciously set by arsonists. Some rumors are plausible, and those who spread them are credible.

**PHASE 2.** After a forest fire has started and received attention in the news media, rumors often appear that suggest that it could be arson. We might hear that someone was seen in a certain place, the police have arrested suspected arsonists, little boys have been playing with matches, or gasoline has been found in a hidden place. On these occasions, journalists are expected to ask the fire brigade: “Is the fire arson?” This question usually cannot be answered immediately because there is still no knowledge of the cause soon after the fire starts. In phase 2, rumors can have a great impact and change and adapt their content according to how the conversations develop. Different rumors may also replace each other depending on how the forest fire develops. It is clear that rumors can have a great impact in phase 2. These rumors can also become a burden to the authorities regarding how they conduct crisis communication. Rumors may also take hold temporarily and cause the agencies and politicians to start commenting on them, which enables them to spread further or, perhaps, that they manage to slow down the spread. Major emergencies and crises such as forest fires usually have an end: Once the fire has been extinguished, the rumors become less hot.

During phase 2, many people become part of the crisis as they have devoted a large part of their time and interest to following and discussing the event. It is clear that they have absorbed a lot of knowledge of what has occurred without conscious planning.

**PHASE 3.** Once the forest fire is out, rumors are not as compelling, so other topics will become the focus of conversation. The concern, confusion, and ambiguities that existed previously have now been dealt with, even if they are not completely resolved. In phase 3, rumors about different issues arise, but they do not have the same impact as in the previous phases. In this situation, the public is confronted with new rumors and stories, although they lack the same impact. Members of the public talk less about rumors, but these beliefs have likely sunk into our consciousness and may reappear with other crises. If agencies, politicians, and people in general spread rumors at this point, then these rumors are not something of immediate importance, but they can enrich a conversation. Rumors appear in several places simultaneously without anyone deliberately spreading them. Some believe that they can control or stop them. That belief is an important part of the attack of falsehoods because it is based on the perception that there is a more or less organized group behind the spread of a rumor. However, this outdated perception also suggests that ordinary people are easily led. We have many examples from World War II propaganda about how to stop rumors. While some have proved to be successful strategies, others have failed in achieving their goals.

### **Phase 1, 2 and 3**

In summary, in phase 1, rumors exist in everyday life without having a major impact. The impact requires a large event to spread rumors as widely as in phase 2. In phase 2, rumors grow quickly and become part of the information and news environment that the public experiences. Rumors have the ability to spread faster than the news, the authorities, and social media. The greater the confusion is, the more rumors come into circulation. Some rumors become strong and cause agencies, politicians, and the media to address them with no certainty of how to get rid of them. In phase 3, after the crisis, rumors still spread, but the crisis has to some extent been left behind. In this phase, the impact of rumors is reduced, and the rumors that exist come to enter phase 1, waiting for a new crisis to emerge, as when summer comes and conversations about forest fires can become relevant.

## **Size of impact**

The size of each phase demonstrates the impact that rumors have. Phase 1 is smaller than phase 2 and highlights that there are direct connections between rumors in everyday life and during crises. There is a greater likelihood that phases 1, 2, and 3 merge when it comes to disease outbreaks. The awareness is more present in people's everyday lives about outbreaks of seasonal flu and stomach illness among children, for example. Infection and diseases are likely to be present in conversations in general. In the area of infection, the danger is more present. Therefore, there is a connection to phase 3 even after the immediate crisis. When considering terrorism, rumor is not linked in the same way even though individual countries have been affected differently by the violence. The rumors are not as linked directly between these parts in rumors about terrorism. However, the phase 3 can be long and painful.

## **Impacts of rumors**

Although it is very difficult to estimate the spread of measures, there are qualitative and quantitative methods. The impact of each phase and the correlations between the phases can differ. For example, the spread of rumors may be intense ahead of the seasonal flu, an interest rate hike, or an incipient war. The idea of the model is that it should illustrate shifts in impact and correlations in how rumors arise, spread and change.

## Transition of rumors

Below, we describe the transitions between the three phases and their correlations.

**Phase 1 is familiar and recurring.** The previous approach has been tried. Rumors have a clear structure and have a persuasive power that is difficult to handle.

**Phase 2 is sudden with great attention that subsides after a while.** This phase creates confusion within organizations and large resources are deployed to deny and convey information. There is a risk of rumors being reinforced.

**Phase 3 is constantly present with limited impact, where rumors spread without being noticed.** Rumors have a recognition factor and are relatively well-known to different target groups. No resources are deployed and the rumors fade away or spread outside the spheres of news media and agencies. They may return later in a similar form.

### Phase 1

In phase 1, rumors circulate about current issues. Rumors occur in a variety of arenas that exist in people's everyday lives. Perhaps a rumor spreads in a school corridor that a teacher is ill, which means that the test will be cancelled. Sometimes, the teacher is healthy and the rumor turns out not to be true, and the students who chose not to study are at a disadvantage. A week later the lesson might be cancelled, but at that point there may be no rumors. Depending on whether someone chooses to share their beliefs, the rumor can be present or absent.

### Phase 2

A prerequisite for phase 2 is that something salient has happened. It can be an emergency or crisis that is noticed by the public, shared in the media, or diffused through social media. The situation is perceived as unclear and there is an information vacuum that the authorities must fill with crisis communication. Rumors spread rapidly and meet no resistance. The media may pick up the rumors unknowingly or with awareness without describing them as rumors. The accuracy of the

rumors is not always questioned. The responsible authority may be more focused on organizing and managing the emergency or crisis. The public will often not initially recognize what the rumors are conveying.

### **Phase 3**

Rumors are known and are exchanged widely in phase 3. They are mixed into shared conversations. The media may also help rumors spread. Despite the spread of rumors, they do not cause much over-reaction and few start fighting them. Some rumors are spread without being noticed. In this context, when people converse, they make statements without the audience reacting to them. Then, we spread them further without attracting much attention, except for the fact that they enrich conversations, news coverage, or social media communication.

## **A circular process**

Rumors are spread in a circular process where they are reused in an eternal wheel. Rumors are immortal, but their vitality is about constantly adapting their content to a situation that is current and arouses public interest. Rumors do not spread unless they have interested an individual or group that has become convinced of its content.

Rumor outbreaks can be found in phases 1, 2, and 3. It is the situation that determines how big they manage to grow. As with infectious diseases, they are already in circulation. When an outbreak occurs, they quickly move to phase 2, where they have a major impact. The rumors in question may have been circulating in phase 1 without exploding into public notice, but after they breakthrough, they can continue to circulate for an extended period of time. However, the rumors can also subside quickly. In certain situations when rumors have subsided, agencies and other actors sometimes claim that they managed to defeat the rumors in the heat of battle.

The transitions between the different phases can evolve very quickly in the face of an unclear situation. Known rumors often receive a lot of attention. The circulation of rumors may appear when we least expect it. Rumors may already be in people's minds and when a crisis arises, they are easily recognized.

Describing rumors in their distinct phases should be seen as a pedagogical project. Rumors are unpredictable phenomena that are rarely started on purpose, but they are present in all fields or areas



A Greek Airforces Canadair CL-415 firefighting plane dumps water on flames southeast of Athens, July 26, 2006. Photo by Kostas Tsironis/AP/TT-Bild.

of interest. We all have different focuses in our private lives and professions. Rumors spread by youth in a school environment may be quite distinct from those spread within a company in a small town. Some rumors establish themselves easily—for example, within phase 1 at a time of a dry period in the summer, recalling the devastating fires from the year before. Discussions about the fires in Australia or Greece may lead to many potent rumors: “The fires were started maliciously,” “the emergency services prioritized other areas,” or “warnings were received much earlier, but nothing was done.” These rumors are based on mistrust and suspicion, perhaps because the fires the year before were poorly handled. However, there may also be rumors that “more people died than was reported in the media,” or perhaps amusing rumors such as “firefighting waterbomber aircraft had a diver into the tank when it went down to the surface to fill it up. The diver was dropped over the burning the forest and the pilots did not take any notice.” Some rumors are completely correct, others are questionable, while still others are absurd. The possibility of rumors about fires exists in our subconscious,



An illustration by M. Magnus Norman, Sweden.

but they must arise in salient contexts, such as when there is a drought in phase 1, the fire has broken out in phase 2, and in conversations after the fire about the cause and claiming responsibility in phase 3.

## Disease outbreaks

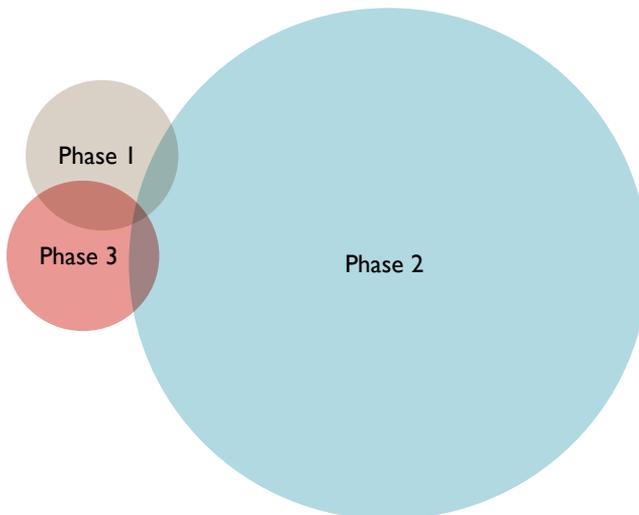
Rumors during a disease outbreak understandably occur frequently because a disease outbreak is a common fear. First, it is something that everyone has experienced from early childhood and is considered something troubling or even dangerous. If someone tells others that they have a cold, we react to the message so that we do not become infected. If there is an outbreak among children at a school, then the news reaches parents quickly. In such situations, there are clear similarities in how to convey the school's information and how the rumor process spreads the claims. In this case, it often reaches many people. Staff, students, and parents begin to exchange information and start to act accordingly. The question of "who started the infection"

is common. Who is Patient Zero? The rumors spread quickly and are then confirmed orally by the school staff, often with a subsequent written message describing the type of infection that occurred. One's experiences and the displeasure of being affected are a reason why these rumors are so common. Once an infection has spread, we start telling others what happened, not only to share the news but also to plan for the future. In this mode, we deal with an event and prepare ourselves for the change that will occur. We find this applies to local cases of stomach flu at school to global pandemics. Rumors are as contagious as the disease itself.

## When rumors spread like airborne disease

In this example, we describe rumors about infectious diseases. The vast majority of people have their own experience and opinion of being infected, which means that rumors are always present in our consciousness and conversations. This affects the responsible agencies who are tasked to handle disease outbreaks. Rumors become competitors to disease-control agencies in conducting crisis communication.

An example of the three phases of rumors during disease outbreaks



**PHASE 1.** Contagion is something that most people have experienced and may have the discussion. It is also an opportunity to talk about own experiences: Perhaps their children have been affected by chicken pox or about vaccinations to get protection from the COVID-19. In this stage there are many angles that can be enriched with our own perceptions and existing rumors.

**PHASE 2.** When a disease breaks out, it receives a lot of attention in its affected area or in larger geographical domains. Because the spread of the infection is perceived as threatening, much attention is given to the danger. The impact and spread of rumors often increase in scope, dominating the news cycle.

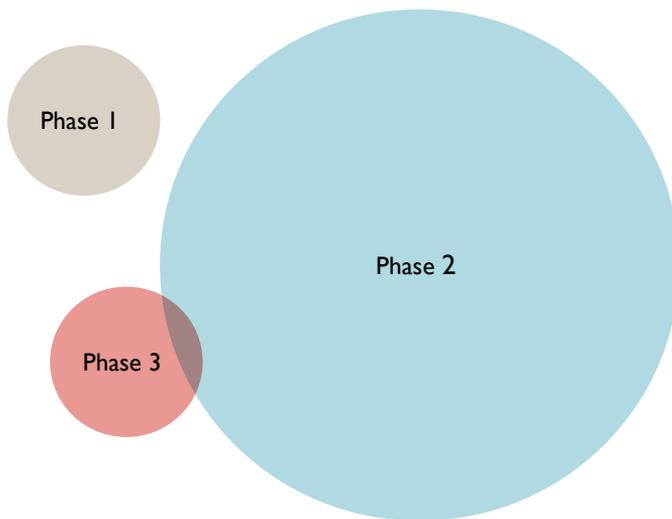
**PHASE 3.** Even after the infection subsides, conversations among people continue, including in social media and in the established news media. The healthcare sector has also for some time shared extensive information, which many citizens have taken to heart. The content of the information and the claims that are discussed are rarely described as rumors. In this stage, rumors are in circulation but with a lower intensity. It may be that other issues dominate the agenda, and that people do not desire to talk about diseases in detail. In this phase, rumors may establish themselves as in other situations when attention is lower.

In phase 1, there is a high possibility for rumors to escalate quickly because people are concerned about being infected. Further, it is likely that attention can move quickly from a calm state in phase 3 to reaching a climax in phase 2. The rumor process within the example of contagion is a clear and well-established phenomenon. This means that the rumors are readily available, and we can quickly be influenced by those claims that have arisen, leading to dramatic reactions. Ambiguous situations often lead to a general concern, hopefully with audiences responding rationally.

## Terrorist attacks

Terrorist attacks are acts of violence that generate widespread attention, often linked to a particular political issue. Terrorist attacks often lead to a sudden, ambiguous situation that creates heightened anxiety, which generates rumors. It also requires that responsible authorities, such as the police, must quickly deal with the incident and conduct crisis communication comforting victims and soothing the wider public. Of course, some countries have suffered more than others in terms of terrorist attacks, which means that the spread of rumors operates differently in those settings.

An example of the three phases of rumors during terrorist attacks



**PHASE 1.** The possibility of terrorism is present in conversations between people and is noticed when an attack occurs. The thought of potential future terrorist attacks is present in the minds of many. Major concerns about traveling rarely affect the vast majority of people. In this situation, rumors can spread about upcoming attacks, but that does not mean that most people will alter their behavior.

**PHASE 2.** When terrorist attacks occur or there are specific warnings of threats, people start talking about it with reference to media reports. This is often followed by statements by the police and politicians. Rumors are at their peak during the event and decrease after the situation resolves itself.

**PHASE 3.** The rumors can remain and be a topic of discussion after the news media addresses the issue. When the issue of terror declines in daily news reporting, rumors also decrease and their intensity is reduced. The rumors that occur are about general perspectives about terror and about citizens' experiences. The concern remains even if it does not affect the public's freedom of movement or their daily activities.

Many countries have a terror-alert level—for example, a warning scales from 1 to 5, where 1 is the lowest danger and 5 is the highest. When the threat level is raised, the police and responsible politicians still expect that everyone should live as usual and that nothing drastically changes, which creates a contradictory perception among the public. Of course, the decision to raise the terror-alert level is difficult to convey and not completely understandable. When the police and responsible politicians take the issue seriously, it often instills an understanding and creates a sense of calm. However, this does not mean that people are content with short answers; these actions actually raise more questions. The questions from the public and the rumors that arise address what has not been answered. This leads to questioning of the police and responsible politicians. It can be just as problematic when crisis communication is doubted and must be clarified. Most people are sincere and ask helpful questions. Waving away the public's questions.

### “The fires are set”

“The fire is arson” is a frequent response to an unexpected conflagration. In the same way as terrorist attacks, these rumors differ depending on the extent to which a country has been affected by fires. In the aftermath of damaging fires that have ravaged Australia, California, Greece, and the Amazon, rumors that the fires were deliberately set may spread quickly. In the same way, rumors are spread when a school, construction site, or residential building catches fire. “Is it done on purpose to create problems or to get money out of the insurance?” There is a wide array of rumors about arson. They seem plausible and make us suspicious and impatient because we demand quick answers. Of note, these rumors are not as present as disease outbreaks that threaten our health, perhaps because the question of whether fires are intentionally set rarely comes up. Rumors of fires are not as established; they are largely driven by the



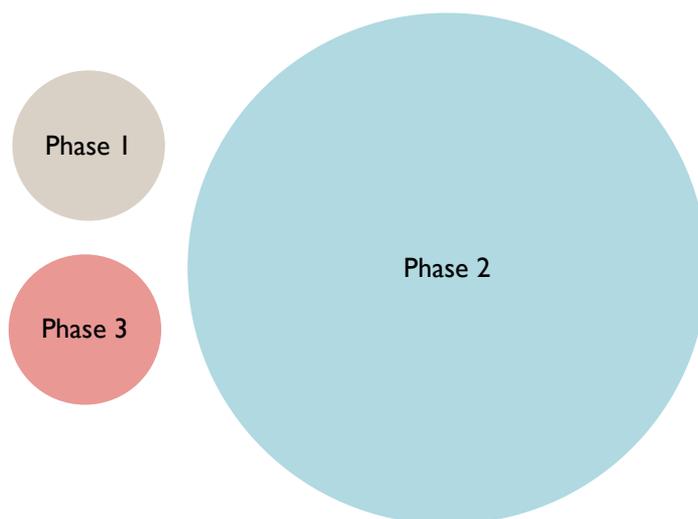
An image of Grenfell Tower in London on the night of June 14, 2017. Photo by Daniel Leal-Olivas/AFP/TT-bild.

media as the issue is often raised at press conferences and the media use it in their reporting as an alternative to the ongoing investigation into the causes of the fire.

On the night of June 14, 2017, a mammoth fire began in the high-rise building called Grenfell Tower in London and could not be extinguished. This tragedy received much attention both in and outside the United Kingdom. Early on, rumors began to circulate about what caused the fire. “Was it arson?” “Was it an act of terrorism?” “Was it an electrical failure?” All these claims arose from the time the fire started, was shown live by the media, and after the devastation was clear. In this situation, it was obviously difficult at first for emergency services to know what caused the blaze. The responsible authorities could only say that they worked to save as many people as possible and that they fought the fire as diligently as they could.

Rumors that the fire may have been arson or that it was caused by an electrical fault raised important questions, even if it turned out that other causes were involved. People understandably wanted to know whether there was intentional malice or if a careless error caused the fire. The rumors conveyed an initial impression. The public had great interest in seeking information about accidents and crises to affix blame.

An example of the three phases of rumors during forest fires



**PHASE 1.** In this situation, rumors may be circulating about a developing drought in the forest that may lead to the start of fires. However, it is even more likely to have rumors that “crazy” people started the fires rather than a fire was caused by machinery owned by forest companies. The latter may be more accurate but not as dramatic or widely spread. Of course, we are reminded, among other things, of fire bans, which means that an awareness is present in our minds of fire danger. The conversations that are conducted contain not only rumors but many other topics that are relevant for fire safety.

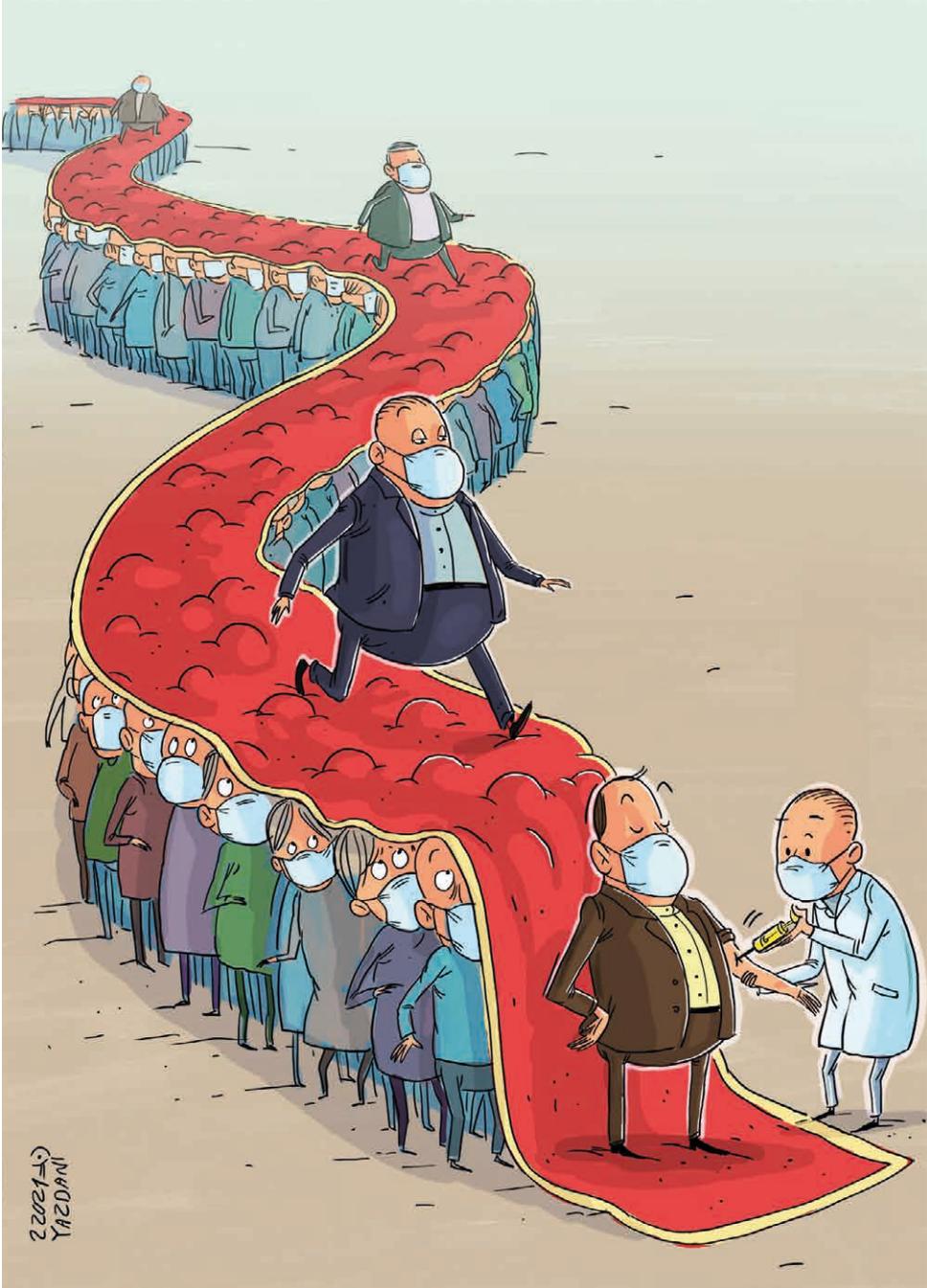
**PHASE 2.** When a fire breaks out, it gets a lot of attention and emergency services respond to the scene quickly. It is in this situation when fire-fighting is occurring and when the rescue leaders are interviewed by the media that rumors spread. In the news reporting, there are often reports that “it cannot be ruled out that the fire was started deliberately” or more vaguely “people were seen at the scene and that some were also arrested.”

**PHASE 3.** After the fires, the rumors become less common in our conversations. As with the large fires in Australia, the rumors take a backseat to other conversations, even though they may spread further. In this stage there are discussions about previous fires and their damage. In this context, rumors spread that they are planted, which we believe regardless of whether they are true. However, they are not based on immediate concerns in this stage in the same way as in the second stage.

## The three phases of rumor mills

Rumors and their content are established and recognized by certain individuals, groups, and, in a broader sense, the public. This does not mean that people discuss emerging information as fitting into different discursive categories such as rumor. Rumor mills concern the recognition of how the story and its content makes us feel. The rumor may be that hospital directors getting ahead of front-line healthcare staff and high-risk groups in the vaccination queue (Olinder, 2024). Even if true, these events probably do not happen to the extent that the rumor suggests. Or perhaps it is really that bad. Another rumor could concern the closure of a company that has not been communicated—suggesting large redundancies—and later turns out to be true. When these types of rumors spread, those who recognize the rumors tend to downplay the content as something that they have heard before. They recognize the form of the story without defining it as a rumor, and ignore whether it is plausible. Sometimes, however, such rumors get a lot of attention.

Rumors exist in people's thoughts and conversations, just like the recognition of various situations and sensations. Many conversations and interactions via social media involve questions about how crises should be handled or how they will develop in the future. While rumors often sound sensational the first time we hear of them, as they are repeated, we often do not react to them. Indeed, when rumors are frequently discussed and rewritten, they exist in the normal communication exchanges between people and in groups. It is important to know that when rumors enter our conversations or from the news, we may not react to the content, and recognize it as a rumor, but accept it unconsciously.



A political cartoon by Yazdani, Iran.

This is something we have learned since childhood. Rumors are part of our way of learning. We process them, are convinced by them, and spread them further, sharing their claims. This process also involves an assessment of their plausibility and the credibility of the communicator. We partake in this process both unconsciously and consciously without considering the consequences or because we want to reach a wider audience. At this stage, people and groups start and spread rumors more or less unconsciously. In phase 1, the core development of rumors occurs. Here we find the managed rumors in our daily conversations; news consumption from established media and social media; as well as all other influences in the form of advertising, education, and political messages.

When rumors receive attention, it is typically because they add something new to an emerging situation that forces a response or makes the recipients take a stand on a certain issue. The rumors challenge claims, provide explanations, or demand answers. Rumors become powerful during crises when there is a vacuum of information or when public concern is well established. However, these aspects are not sufficient for rumors to gain power. Their content shines a light on the problem that has arisen with a specific detail and where a possible answer can be found. In this situation, established rumors may evolve or a new one may begin to spread. We usually do not know how long the rumors will spread, perhaps for an hour or for eternal life.

Phase 2 occurs when the conditions for getting a lot of attention are most favorable. Once a crisis has arisen, there is often great confusion, ambiguity, and an information vacuum as the public waits for the relevant agencies to provide information to convey what is happening. Moreover, emerging concern and uncertainty among the public feed's rumors. In such situations, rumors focus our attention and encourage us to spread them further. Even if authorities live up to their responsibilities and provide crisis communication, we may choose to believe rumors rather than the official correct information. This phenomenon is not new. Traditionally, the most efficient way to spread information is between people horizontally in conversation. Authorities, political representatives, the news media, and, most recently, social media have depended on a vertical delivery of content. When we convey current news, the situation is often top-down. It has to do with who has the responsibility to explain and who needs to know in the event of an emergency or crisis.

In phase 2 there is frequently considerable competition among numerous information sources. Rumors may be marginalized if another event catches our attention at the same time. This could be a completely different type of event. Rumors often wane in strength when other claims emerge simultaneously. Rumors often blow by, and we only notice them afterwards and perhaps are a little “disappointed” that we did not recognize hot rumors when they first started to circulate. We most often pay attention to rumors when many people already know about them. When the public and the media begin to pay attention to rumors as the claims question public agencies, they become widely known. The relevant agencies usually have the responsibility to manage the rumors in this situation, but it is more common that rumors are not noticed. Of course, some agencies that are happy to present how successful they have been in combating rumors, proving that there are recognizable forces behind their origin and spread.

As mentioned, rumors escalate in phase 2. They may continue to spread, evolve, or perhaps decrease in strength—shelved as part of the historical rumor bank. Phase 2 is the time when rumors can have a substantial impact. In the event of sudden emergencies or crises where many people are injured, it is common to be confused about the number of people killed, injured, and taken to various hospitals. It may take a long time to get accurate information about a few injured people. This is why it is problematic to comment on the number of injured at an early stage, providing a figure that is often not correct. Nevertheless, information about the number and location of victims is repeatedly stated in various rumors and is demanded by their audience.

We know that approximately 3,000 people died in New York during the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. However, the original claim in the American and Swedish media was that tens of thousands had died (Nord et al., 2020). At first, the media lacked local knowledge and began to speculate freely, and rumors spread quickly. The claims that came from the media and reached its audience seemed plausible. This horrific event caused several rumors to become widely spread for some time. Revision of the early number of people who died demonstrates how much news consists of rumors, guesses, and “confident” journalistic assessments (despite how wrong they proved to be).

People often wish to gain a sense of the extent of a crisis. In the event of a power outage, for example, many (reasonably) want to know when the electricity will return. It is understandably tempting for power companies to provide a time that appears certain, such as within, for example, 4–6 hours, based previous experience. However, these projections are often inexact and sometimes wildly incorrect. Incorrect rumors can result when companies attempt to keep the media happy and get some respite. If the electrical lines have not been successfully repaired, then sharper questions may result. Sometimes, rumors give clearer answers than those that the power companies provide, but when the electricity is restored in the affected area, public conversation focuses on other issues. The rumors disappear.

People who are affected want to know quickly and confidently. This focus on solutions contributes to the spread rumors. Rumors gather people around a problem that needs solutions or point out the actor who is the cause of the trouble. Rumors gain a lot of attention and intrigue everyone from the general public to government executives, often providing a claim that cuts through the noise and gets many people to listen. It can inspire disbelief, disclosures, solutions, or even considerable entertainment value, perhaps humorously well-intentioned, satirical commentary. These rumors can include:

- The virus that causes COVID-19 leaked from a high-risk laboratory in Wuhan, China.
- Chinese authorities knew that the virus that causes COVID-19 was dangerous and covered up the release.
- Hospital directors received COVID-19 vaccines before healthcare staff and patients in high-risk groups.
- Management is negotiating to sell and shut down a company, so many of the employees will lose their jobs.
- Politicians give assignments to relatives and friends instead of putting out a call for the assignments.
- A president has a fatal disease.

The list goes on, although some rumors are more plausible than others, have more credible sources, and have been spread previously.

When rumors receive a lot of attention, certain mechanisms are set in motion. It is the need to know, given the conditions themselves, that cause the rumors to gain traction. The mechanisms involve the absence of information about what happened. The unclear situation raises questions and sparks emotions. Rumors might address:

- An underlying message that points to a particular individual, group, authority, or responsible politician to name a few;
- An initiated source released a certain type of information;
- Someone has seen, heard, or personally experienced what was conveyed in the rumors.

Several rumors have arisen during events that developed into crises and affected public trust and the conditions for crisis communication to the public. The 1998 discotheque fire in Gothenburg involved an estimated 398 adolescents and young people: 63 died and 214 were injured. The situation was initially chaotic, and there was also great confusion and difficulty in conducting crisis communications because the circumstances were so unclear. Even though the rescue service, the police, the ambulance service, social services, the media, and politicians did their utmost, it was challenging to create a clear picture of the effects of the fire and its consequences. A rumor that came to play a key role was that the fire was set on purpose. As noted, this rumor very often arises during fires, regardless of whether people are injured. Those kinds of claims are well recognized and well justified because they are plausible and credible. Nevertheless, they cause major problems for those who must fight the fire and investigate its cause.

In the Gothenburg discotheque fire, the victims were mainly young people between the ages of 12–25 years, and many of them had a foreign background. At the press conference after the fire, the rescue leader was asked if the fire was set, to which he answered that there were “signs that indicate that the fire was arson” (Statens offentliga utredningar, 1999). He received a lot of criticism for this claim because it gave rise to speculation before an investigation had determined the cause. One rumor that gained a lot of attention was that racists were behind the fire. The rumor spread widely in Sweden and throughout the world. The rumor spread on Arabic-language satellite television channels, which repeated, spread, and fueled the claims. This contributed to difficulties in responding to the rumors, as it was not known whether the fire was set, and, if so, by whom. Nevertheless, the Arabic-language TV channels

continued to spread the rumors, which were then widely learned by viewers in other countries and Sweden. The rumors arose out of a tragic and chaotic situation and filled the information vacuum. Many believed the rumors for a long time and even today, after four young people from the same community who were at the disco confessed and were convicted in 2000 for starting the fire. However, the news of the sentence received little attention in the Arabic-language media. The rumors have decreased in intensity over time but still live on today.

Rumors have also spread about Swedish authorities kidnapping Muslim children, related to the LVU campaign (LVU is Swedish legislation about the care of young people, allowing government workers to place children in state protective custody if they are judged to be in danger). The fact that there are rumors about children being kidnapped or hidden is nothing new. When a child is taken away from their home by the authorities, even if the home is less than ideal, there is likely to be suspicion of kidnapping. Sometimes, this suspicion is justified. In the past, parents were embarrassed when their children were taken away and their reaction was to remain quiet. Alcohol was often involved. In recent decades, social services agencies of several countries have taken care of children and have had to deal with rumors that they are kidnapping children. In several European countries, rumors assert that Muslim children are kidnapped and adopted by Christian families or even same-sex couples. In Finland, the issue has been about kidnapping Russian children rather than Muslim children. In Sweden, some agencies and the current and previous governments consider it to be the largest disinformation campaign ever directed against the country—although this claim is hard to confirm. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that these rumors are problematic. Taking vulnerable children away from their parents requires careful consideration. These are also among the most difficult cases for agencies and courts to address.

One must take great care when considering the origin of the rumors and misinformation. There are two options:

- Parents, relatives, and their community react strongly to the decision to take the children into the state's care. This frustration is expressed by claiming that the children were kidnapped and given to strangers.
- Actors such as a foreign state or religious institutions react to the care of children because of cultural anxieties. Activists in Muslim countries may initiate the rumors and run coordinated disinformation campaigns against Sweden and the relevant agencies in the country.

There are differences and similarities regarding the rumors related to the Gothenburg discotheque fire and Swedish authorities kidnapping Muslim children. The reactions certainly arose quickly and spontaneously and then became part of what the traditional or social media convey as disinformation. The most interesting aspect is how the Swedish agencies have reacted to the rumors and disinformation. The rumors that the discotheque fire was a racist act were difficult to respond to while investigating the fire, and little was done to combat them. Despite the fact that these rumors still exist, they are no longer widespread in Sweden or abroad. However, the rumors that Swedish authorities kidnap Muslim children have showed a much more robust diffusion, especially due to social media. Moreover, the kidnapping rumors have been spread differently by actors such as states and their controlled media compared with the rumors about the discotheque fire. As far as dissemination is concerned, individuals spread the information consciously to draw attention to the content of the message and their political concerns. A big difference is how the current and previous Swedish governments have acted and reacted to the claims, and how the agencies and the media have handled the rumors and disinformation. The media often serves as spreaders rather than fighters of the rumors and disinformation as the claims become widely known through press conferences, statements about it in the media, and attempts to counter the claims. The question must be asked: What is the best way to deal with the problem? Should the rumors be fought or ignored?

Politicians and authorities often fall into the trap by commenting on various claims about which they have limited background or current knowledge. This often worsens the issue. The media get politicians to discuss the rumors and disinformation, leading them into the trap of spreading the rumor to those who had been previously unaware of it. Leading politicians could not ignore the spread of rumors, because they were convinced of its potential danger and hoped to comfort the public. Governments tasked their agencies with the responsibility to deal with the rumors and what appeared to be a disinformation campaign. Municipalities also started their own information campaigns to cope with these rumors.

Surprisingly, no journalists have asked politicians or agencies about the details of the rumors; rather, they have continued to refer to them in their critical analysis. The media has accepted the claims by politicians and agencies that it was a coordinated disinformation campaign aimed at Sweden to harm society. It is of course not easy to provide a sensible explanation when it comes to either spontaneously arising claims such as rumors or intentionally false information such as disinformation.

Municipal social services have long been at the center of the need to control rumors. Sometimes, employees have had to face verbal and physical threats. An important question is whether the Swedish authorities took the appropriate action to address the rumors that they were kidnapping Muslim children. First, the rumors had been circulating for some time before they were noticed, which is not surprising. Agencies and politicians are usually reactive and slow to respond when it comes to risks, shortcomings, threats and claims. Unfortunately, emergencies, crimes, and crises must be dramatic before agencies and politicians react and take action. When diffuse phenomena such as rumors capture attention, it is difficult to determine how politicians and agencies should respond.

In Sweden, coping with disinformation and rumors about kidnapping has also been linked to the Koran burnings carried out by various extremists. This intermingling is quite remarkable. How this confusion arose between perceptions that Swedish authorities are kidnapping Muslim children and demonstrations about Koran burnings can be compared to an example from the COVID-19 pandemic. At its outbreak, there was great confusion and an information vacuum. The Swedish authorities downplayed the threat and called it a cold, a claim that they soon came to regret. Rumors asserted that the virus that causes COVID-19 escaped from a high-risk laboratory in Wuhan, China. The big question that arose was a classic rumor that focused on the safety of vaccines. There have been many rumors about vaccines since the first ones targeting smallpox originated in 1796. These rumors are well known in healthcare and medical research but have not decreased despite intensive health information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine skeptics gained followers and acquired a substantial impact via social media with support from certain opinion leaders. Vaccine skeptics also demonstrated in the streets and squares, receiving much attention in the media. In Sweden, the police, the security service, leading

politicians, and government agencies warned about the situation. The demonstrations included a motley crowd of health food enthusiasts, yoga moms, environmentalists, activists, and even some extremists with neo-Nazi connections. In these cases, the opinions were tied to the presence of extremists, a situation that is hardly desirable when understanding diverse positions and wanting to influence the public is the goal.

While a legitimate debate about vaccine resistance exists, it is easy to link it to the group that deviates the most or is considered the most dangerous. Many opinion groups act in the same arena, which creates ambiguity. This is not a new phenomenon, but when agencies conflate distinct groups, even if all are skeptical of vaccinations, an accurate assessment is lost. While this is easy, it is also lazy. In such circumstances, it is difficult to respond properly to rumors. It might be said that agencies, the media, and politicians are oriented 180 degrees in the wrong direction. When these entities share the same misdirection, it is almost impossible to return to a proper starting point.

In these cases, it is important for agencies, the media, and politicians not to lump diverse groups together without clear justification. Doing so will make it more difficult to respond to rumors and other types of intentionally incorrect information. It can be said without exaggeration that in these two cases, agencies, politicians, and the media allowed problems to accumulate. These circumstances make it more difficult to conduct crisis communication that provides reliable content to a wide variety of groups. Agencies, politicians, and the media should be aware of how to address those with differing perspectives.

When events lead to public anxiety, difficult problems may be overly simplified. An old problem may be linked to new ones with all handled by the same agencies, complicating both practical efforts and crisis communication. In these cases, older rumors may continue to exist even if public interest in them has decreased markedly. This can be compared to the fact that rumors about vaccines are not as prominent anymore due to the weakening of the pandemic and people not receiving the COVID-19 vaccines to the same extent after restrictions were relaxed.

The rumors remain latent and when the next disease outbreak occurs, they start spreading with a slightly changed content. The folklorist Kitta (2019) wrote her book *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore* before the COVID-19 pandemic about plagues and related rumors that are most common. Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic itself was new and surprising, but the rumors fit

previous categories. The crisis communication carried out by various health agencies could certainly have been clearer if they had planned for a pandemic in light of knowledge of how to combat rumors.

New and emerging crises reduce the interest of the public and agencies in older rumors. This phenomenon is both good and bad because it provides strategies for the type of crisis communication to be used. Agencies and politicians are sometimes uncertain as to whether to act in the event of emergency and crises. Rumors usually decrease over time as the intensity of the intertwined problems is reduced, as in phase 3.

What is interesting about rumors is that they can be more or less known by the wider public and by professional groups who may have been directly affected by their spread. However, many may not treat the rumors as just rumors, but rather as deliberate inaccuracies, lies, or even entertaining stories. Regardless of one's view of rumors, they may circulate within certain circles, including among young people or the elderly. With young people, we find their discovery of new ways of experiencing society. Among the elderly, they have experienced similar events and may come to question the content of rumor or might accept them too readily. In both cases, rumors are spread in conversations and on media forums, even if authorities do not widely notice them.

In addition, people may either spread rumors or be recipients of them, later passing on the information they received. However, we must recognize that not all rumors are controversial. Conversations are not always a critical forum where rumors are dissected and exposed and then relegated to the dustbin. The topics are often unconsidered. Those who are part of such conversations aren't immune to rumors or other forms of influence. During phase 3, after the events have been resolved, the circulation of rumors is rarely addressed by the authorities or the media.

Likewise, in phase 1 many rumors do not receive much attention but can be shared in a discussion between people on certain occasions. People can start talking about attending a football match or concert but find that the conversation slides into talking about terrorist attacks and learning that the bags that people forget are picked up by the police bomb squad and then defused. Despite the topic of conversation and the apparent concern, members of the public are still willing to bring their children to football matches or concerts. The conversation becomes a valve to balance their underlying anxiety and sharing information that permits the talkers to feel safe. Still, people learn of those

restrictions such that you may not bring bulky bags to events with large audiences. Daily life continues and rumors circulate at low intensity within demarcated communities, but the rumors still exist and can grow quickly if a threat is recognized or anxiety is experienced.

Perhaps phase 3 offers the best opportunity to educate agencies, politicians, and the media about rumors and their impact, when rumors are communicated with a low intensity. It makes sense to avoid conducting training immediately after a terrorist act or during heightened concern as with rumors about the kidnapping of Muslim children. These potent events control our thoughts, and it becomes difficult to think critically of the best way to respond. Trying to deny rumors when they are at their strongest is unproductive. No sane person climbs a ladder to pick cherries in a storm! We do that when the weather is calm and safe. Similarly, we should approach rumors when anxiety is low. In this situation, people are ready to listen to advice from crisis communicators. Educating, training, practicing, and planning provide the optimal conditions for crisis communication as an audience can relate to rumors in a more nuanced way. This also applies to politicians and the news media as well as healthcare or social service workers that have closer contact with those affected.

There is a dilemma: We often learn best when something is relevant and engages our interest. We should not refrain from crisis communication, even in the most difficult times. Nevertheless, to ensure that the mission of agencies is the most effective, we need to be prepared and ready to act when an emergency or crisis emerges. We must also be aware of what rumors are and how they can be recognized and countered.

Rumors can go from being low-intensity background beliefs to spreading rapidly among the public and via social media. When rumors gain impact, it is often because of a salient event that has occurred, as in phase 2. It is usually at this late stage that agencies and politicians react, giving their full attention to the danger of rumors. Most rumors receive limited attention for the period of phase 1 and then become low intensity again as in phase 3. During phase 2, however, the rumors are salient when authorities are caught off guard by their persuasive power, especially in moments of ambiguity.

When those politicians and agencies who once believed the rumors and even spread them now must start denying them, they face a challenging task. Too often these authorities do not inquire what rumors are, how they arise, and how they spread. It is understandable that agencies tasked with public safety wish to combat rumors with countermeasures, but it is crucial is to treat the cause and not the symptoms (a remark also found in healthcare). Condemning rumors may be convenient, but it is not effective in their control.

## Rumors return sooner or later with new angles on the crisis they address

A lot of time and effort are put into fighting rumors but, interestingly, people and authorities are equally surprised that rumors return and are perceived as brand new. Most rumors are recycled: They have the same structure, and in many cases, they contain similar content. Even if the rumors were known before, their content surprises us and makes us lose focus when dealing with the crisis.

## Rumors – part of our civilization myth

Rumors can be described as the first form of news. They were shared long before written language, a phenomenon that probably comes from when people needed to warn each other of impending danger. The original way of sharing rumors, legends, and myths came from when a group sat around a fire. Even if the language was simple according to modern standards, we should not underestimate their way of thinking and communicating. People sought answers to questions that worried them, explaining why major events occurred. The conversations among people in small or large groups contributed to calm, recognized fears, but also involved passing on learned behaviors. This gathering may have raised more answers than questions. Myths, magic, and religion grew from these interactions to deal with the demand for knowledge, finding explanations and shaping beliefs. Even then, rumors made people listen and spread the explanations. As today, they involved dramatic claims. The content followed a known structure but also adapted to the current situation. This was of course troublesome for leaders who wanted to control people's minds and not be questioned or receive competing opinions from rumors. The spread of rumors contributed to the development of language and how we convey important content.

We will never know the origin of language and how people began to communicate. Nevertheless, scholars speculate that humans were equipped with an internal language that resembled other forms of communication. When people began to negotiate, they were equipped with a flexible language that relied on similar structures. It is likely that groups had similar ways of perceiving dangers, giving explanations that could be rumors or news.

## Prioritizing the latest first

A significant aspect of rumors and news are their order of priority: The most important always comes first. Newsrooms prioritize their stories in a similar way; this is an aspect to which we will return.

Mythologies contain examples associated with rumors, gossip, or news. In Greek mythology, PHEME was the goddess of rumor, news, and fame. Through her trumpet or horn, she spread an agenda designed for attention. She also meddled in human affairs and irritated the people she met. The rumors and news were said to come from the god Zeus. Other companions to the gods also handle gossip—for example, in Roman mythology Ossa was the goddess of gossip who had wings and lived in the shadows. In Norse mythology, Odin and his ravens Hugin and Munin were most strongly associated with rumors and gossip. The ravens were sent out into the human realm to learn what the people were discussing and returned to tell Odin. In the Bible and the Koran, rumors are rewritten, although often in negative terms.

Rumors have been present throughout human history in various forms. When infectious diseases ran rampant, the spread of rumors was crucial because it was the fastest and most efficient way to convey a message. When the Plague claimed many lives, people's worries and fears contributed to the spread of rumors. These communications in stressful moments helped people to act rationally.



Oden with Hugin and Munin.  
An illustration from "Norse  
Gods" by Johan Egerkrans.

## Rumors are surprising, unpleasant, or amusing

Rumors thrive just as they did thousands of years ago, but the major difference is that they spread more quickly as people can travel more easily. Ancient rulers would send messages with their emissaries back home to help the state function, but they were slow to satisfy curiosity. In time, kings and religious leaders sent out edicts to their subordinates. The means of communication was then, as now, mainly oral but also involved messengers proclaiming messages in a public square. Letter writing as a means of communication eventually became more common. Later, telegrams and newspapers grew rapidly and became accessible to a large number of people. By the early twentieth century, the breakthrough of radio allowed news to spread quickly and widely. Television as a visual medium and later the emergence of digital platforms of social media have meant that the spread of information, claims and general news have exploded recently.

## Understanding and managing rumors in ancient times

In the well-known rhetoric textbook *Rhetorica ad Herennium* by Cicero from 80 BC, rumors were rewritten. The writing, like everything else at the time, was directed to free men and their sons about how they should represent themselves in political contexts, at festivals, or during court proceedings. This also meant building the ability to analyze a situation before, during, and after events occurred. Rumors and gossip were common in these contexts. Sometimes, they were associated with slander and defending one's reputation, but they could include sarcasm and humor. Rumors were considered problematic and difficult to capture, often had a negative connotation, and were analyzed and dealt with in such a way as to shape one's honor. Given that the spoken word was crucial, it was important to know which rhetorical styles would increase the power of rumor or reduce their consequences.

*...that false rumors were spread about an innocent man, thereby taking advantage of the general argument that it is not proper to give credence to rumors. But if none of this yields results, he should claim as a last resort that this is not a discussion about the defendant's morals before the censors but a trial in court of the other party's accusations. (Ad Her. II:5)*

Rhetoric includes concepts and methods that can be used to analyze the content of a rumor. Insinuation (*insuniatio* in Latin) means a careful approach to understand a statement. We usually say that rumors “lay in someone’s lap,” which means that rumors are handed to someone who does not receive them voluntarily, but perhaps not unwillingly. It is just placed in the “lap” and the recipient or group of people can manage the information as they wish. Insinuation can be considered a neutral concept with a negative connotation, but it often involves smearing someone. It is about “the effort to get along well with someone, willingness, effort to win an audience” (Rydstedt, 1993). Sometimes rumors are presented in a humorous way because there is often an entertainment value that attracts public interest.

Rumors occur in different ways—whether considering the past or today’s digital world. Regardless of the time, they are conveyed in the same way in an introductory form similar to a newspaper headline or the beginning of a TV or radio feature. When we talk to others, we change topics often and jump from one issue to another. Each topic gets an introduction where interest must be captured quickly. In rhetoric, this is called *exordium* (Latin), which means to catch the listener’s interest and “should arouse attention, goodwill and learning.” After the introduction, it is necessary to build an understandable story (*narratio* in Latin). Today, the concept of narrative has become commonplace and is used widely in news reporting and in how authorities use language on matters relating to deliberately misleading content. The concept of narrative has acquired a negative meaning as it is related to lies—for example, from Russian troll factories. However, narrative is ultimately a neutral concept and applies to several fields of literature.

In the past, rumors were often presented in a rambling headline or stealthy fashion so that the listener would feel comfortable with the claims. The same applies to gossip and urban legends. Having knowledge and awareness of rumors was useful in detecting them or moving past them. Within archeology and history, sources and

...”that false rumors were spread about an innocent man, thereby taking advantage of the general argument that it is not proper to give credence to rumors. But if none of this yields results, he should claim as a last resort that this is not a discussion about the defendant’s morals before the censors but a trial in court of the other party’s accusations.” AD HER. II:5

evidence are necessary. In legal proceedings, there is a requirement for technical evidence and witnesses for what is presented by the parties. Insinuations based on hearsay should not be permitted in a trial. Rumor has its place, but its place is not everywhere.

According to learned Greeks and Romans, rumors usually occurred in the political arena and affected everyone (i.e., the masses as well as the rulers). Politicians presented visions of the future and portrayed their opponents as people who shirk responsibility. In these contexts, rumors were more the rule than the exception. In the classical art of oratory, it was common to spread allegations about one's opponent with vulgar words. During that time, there were many others competing for people's attention. It could be people in a square telling tales and myths for payment, or dramas with satire questioning the powers and the credibility of elites. Rumors flourished then, just as in all other times.

In the debate where opponents of widely accepted opinion met to twist and turn common perspectives, it was up to the listeners to determine whether the content was plausible and the speaker credible. The basic idea was that every citizen of society should be equipped to relate to what circulated in conversation. In several quotations in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, we learn how we should relate to rumors. Although this textbook is influential in its approach to legal speech, several parts address how rumors arise and how we should relate and respond to them. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that rumors are described as difficult to verify and that more teaching and practical exercises are needed.

*VIII – Of Rumors: For and Against. We shall speak in favour of rumors by saying that a report is not usually created recklessly and without some foundation, and that there was no reason for anybody wholly to invent and fabricate one; moreover, if other rumors usually are lies, we shall prove by argument that this one is true. We shall speak against rumors if we first show that many rumors are false, and cite examples of false reports; if we say that the rumors were the invention of our enemies or of other men malicious and slanderous by nature; and if we either present some story invented against our adversaries which we declare to be in every mouth, or produce a true report carrying some disgrace to them, and say we yet have no faith in it for the reason that any person at all can produce and spread any disgraceful rumor or fiction about any other person. If, nevertheless, a rumor seems highly plausible, we can destroy its authority by logical argument.*

*Because the Conjectural Issue is the most difficult to treat and in actual suits needs to be treated most often, I have the more carefully examined all its divisions, in order that we may not be hindered by even the slightest hesitation or blunder, if only we have applied these precepts of theory in continuous practice. Now let me turn to the subtypes of Legal Issue. (Ad Her. II:13)*

Rumors arose when “good will was lacking,” for example, from responsible authorities, companies or individuals. They arose like wildfire, even several thousand years ago, and created a great demand for answers that were sometimes impossible to obtain. When the answers came, the “best before” date for credible answers has expired. Of note, “good will” was present and rumors were spread because they presented explanations. They had, just like now, status as phenomena that required answers and explanations. Then as now, there is also a cheerful entertainment factor that cannot be ignored. When humor, irony, satire, and sarcasm find their way to caricature power or current events, they are hard to resist. In some cases, rumors give hope because they provide an answer that we come to believe.

## Rumors and reputation

A person who makes insinuations always takes a risk that they could lose one or more listeners. Here, the reputations of the target as well as the person who puts forth the rumor are at stake. Hence, rumor and reputation are closely linked. In the same way as in the digitized media, rumors are spread that sometimes fall flat and are hardly noticed and receive no attention. However, those who manage to convince people gain even more impact.

Rumor and gossip that mentions a person with a damaged reputation will be perceived as more plausible than when someone who has not been embroiled in scandals is accused. Those who are considered irreplaceable may be protected.

## When the media puts something in the lap of news consumers

At the time of the terrorist attack in Drottninggatan on April 7, 2017, a number of rumors were spread that shootings had taken place in Stockholm. In the briefings afterwards, rumors were everywhere: in the media, among citizens, and even in police radio communications.

The rumors gained a foothold and acquired power. Audiences had to choose what to believe. The media did not inform the public until well after the fact that the account of the shooting involved rumors. The police were challenged in clarifying what was going on and became spreaders themselves (Nord et al., 2018).

It is hardly new that the media conveys unconfirmed information that consumers must evaluate. What is problematic, however, is when people's lives and health are threatened and they face an uncertain situation because of their reliance on the media and the authorities as their main sources of information. The questions appear and the answers do not wait. The transition from observations to consequences requires that we do the following:

- Learn about rumors by conducting exercises on diffusion and to learn to how to recognize them.
- Decide how we should relate to rumors that have arisen.
- Choose the appropriate strategy when a comment can be made about the rumors.
- Consider how rumors should be dealt with.
- Determine what consequences they may have.

## “Cheap advice is always the most expensive”

Today there is a concept of “debunking” that aims to eliminate rumors. This goal has been around for as long as rumors have circulated. It is desirable to try to kill rumors that arise, a process that is perceived as simple, right, and necessary given that rumors often disappear, change shape, or decrease in strength. People try different strategies that they believe are effective to fight rumors, an endeavor that is thought to be satisfying. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Combating rumors contributes to strengthen, preserve, or weaken and suppress the content of rumors. Rumors remain in our conversations and the news if they fulfill a function and then disappear and are often replaced by other rumors that raise other perspectives and again fulfill a function.

Because rumors present claims, they create reactions that are difficult to defend against. A management team in an organization can become completely preoccupied with a rumor's assertion. Rumors create intrigue at work or propose parallel actions that sometimes are outside the official perspective. They are faster and reach many more people because their

content is impactful. As stated, rumors have no definitive source and do not belong to an organization's communication strategy. They arise and are then tested, and those that are not persuasive quickly disappear and are replaced by others that may have greater success. Rumors that do not catch hold are rarely mentioned. We only talk about rumors that gain traction. The rumor process can be explained as a test of how rumors reach and gather interest in order to convince us of their validity.

Rumors with a large impact and that succeed in convincing many may be similar in their design and develop at about the same time, even if they have no direct connection. The same uncertainty affects most people and therefore the rumors can grow strong and spread rapidly. On the other hand, rumors may come from only one person and then cause an agency or responsible politician to lose focus on the main issue. This is a problem that has arisen many times in the past and will surely continue, especially when there is an established public concern as well as an ambiguous situation. Authorities, politicians, and those who are responsible for emergencies and crises must learn what rumors look like, how they behave and what trouble they can cause. A few rumors that arise during emergencies and crises should be mentioned.

## Traffic accidents and other emergencies

In the aftermath of major traffic accidents, there is often confusion about how many people were injured and taken to emergency rooms by ambulance. The ambulance and rescue service staff and the police who respond to the scene to control traffic are familiar with this situation. An important task in the immediate aftermath of a major traffic accident is to identify and create an overview of what happened and decide how to protect as many people as possible. Decisions must be made quickly and there may be circumstances that make the choices difficult. However, a lack of clarity may involve the number of injured and the degree of injuries as well as what caused the wreck. These facts can cause confusion. In major accidents, exact figures may be difficult to obtain and often inaccurate.

There may be several conflicting rumors for the same accident:

*“Two people have been sent to hospital by ambulance.”*

*“One person has been sent to hospital.”*

*“Two people have been sent to two different hospitals.”*

*“In total, eight people have been taken to hospital.”*

*“No injured people have arrived at hospital X.”*

*“Too few ambulances were sent to the scene of the accident.”*

*“The most seriously injured never made it to hospital alive.”*

This type of confusion is common. In time, the correct number of people affected by the accident becomes available. The important thing is that the emergency services on the scene perform their job and save as many people as possible. Nevertheless, this situation is an example of the great interest in finding out exactly how many have been injured, which inevitably leads to speculation. It is common for the media on the scene to believe that their most important task is to convey how many people were injured and how seriously. The details are often highlighted about the name of the hospital to which the injured were taken. Intense time pressure is evident in the reporting. In such situations, rescue personnel interact with the media and with members of the public who also may provide information to the media.

The ambiguity that arises affects those who handle the accident. It affects their ability to command and control the situation in conducting crisis communication aimed at the public and tests their credibility in dealing with an event that appears chaotic. If you wish to avoid chaos, communication is essential. Uncertainty must be resolved as the public demands the facts. Rumors in such situations are frequent. After the injured are dealt with, rumors must be next.

## **An act of terror can restart known rumors**

Terrorist attacks also generate rumors. A common one is that there are more coordinated attacks that are taking place elsewhere at the same time. These rumors were spread during the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 14, 2015; Stockholm on April 7, 2017; and Barcelona on August 17, 2017, among others. Rumors of coordinated attacks must be considered even if there is no concrete evidence. Our understanding of coordinated attacks is derived from military tactics. Consider the

attacks of September 11, 2001: The real purpose was not to create maximum destruction, but rather to get attention and spread fear. This can be done with small or large actions, so the creation of fear-inducing rumors is a vital goal for a successful terrorist attack.

A terrorist attack requires the police to respond in case attacks will occur in several places at the same time. In these cases, the rumors are perceived as plausible and the sources as credible: The threats cannot be ignored. The public, frightened by what happened, talk about whether there may be more violence in the future or whether other attacks have already happened. Traditional and social media easily accepts rumors of a coordinated attack, and even if they recognize that they are reporting rumors, they spread the claims.

There are also designations of various groups that they believe have carried out the act. In the Barcelona attack, the infamous Basque terrorist group ETA was blamed for the crime, which turned out to be incorrect. ISIS claimed responsibility for the deed due to Spain's involvement in the war against them. The terrorist act caused Spain to bring home their military troops. Similarly, Muslim terrorist organizations were singled out by journalists at the Swedish public service television company (SVT) in the terrorist acts in Oslo and Utöya on July 22, 2011. However, it turned out to be a lone National Socialist who carried out the act. What is clear about various acts of terrorism is that the speculation about who carried it out starts immediately. Some experts are inclined to pontificate and desire to participate in the media so that they are known as the one who got it right first.

Rumors are often dealt with when they are at their most intense. This approach is often counterproductive as it leads to escalation: The rumors grow stronger, and more people spread them. It is easy to see this when the crisis involves many authorities, the media, and the public, and when the concerns and uncertainties are clearest. Doing nothing goes against every imaginable law of crisis management. There are multitudes of different phenomena, information, and communicative aspects that function differently. Rumors and intentionally false content such as disinformation should not be considered together because they represent different communicative forms. Rumors, however, can be transformed into misinformation or disinformation and vice versa. Although the distinction exists, it can be muddled.

## Corrections and denials

In the media, it is customary to make corrections when a factual error is noticed. In newspapers, you can find corrections in a place that is not prominent; some newspapers have a readers' editor who notes the inaccuracies. Sometimes, the media highlights what competitors reported wrongly and give that correction extra publicity as they gloat. However, these corrections have a limited impact. Corrections must be made, but they need not be proportional to news attention.

Another perspective involves the so-called denial of a rumor, which can take a variety of forms. Such denials can be parts of news about statements, factual errors from various sources, or the confusion among people. They do not have to deal directly with rumors, misinformation, or disinformation. Denials sometimes have a dramatic component when someone is considered to be at fault. In denials, the media may have misquoted their source, the source may have spoken incorrectly, or there may have been several sources in conflict. There are of course several variants of both corrections and denials, but a common feature is their often-limited impact. Nevertheless, people demand that corrections and denials be published to "put things right."

Criticizing a news item with counter-news is often a logical dead end. Statements, regardless of how they arise, capture the moment and bring listeners along with them. Denial often reinforces the rumors and makes them more salient. Even rumors that are not denied become more interesting when they are elaborated, because they are spread in trusting conversations or in contexts where they are believed to reveal something significant.

Sometimes, authorities argue that we should not spread rumors or incorrect information further. People are encouraged to be critical of sources, including those at large political demonstrations, after terrorist attacks and during pandemics. The public can perceive this type of message in several ways. Questions often grow and become a topic of conversation and can be spread more widely, dampened, or continuing at the same level. We risk the effects of confronting rumors that have arisen from an unclear situation where a concern has already arisen. There is also pressure from politicians and authorities to urge people not to spread rumors or inaccuracies. When people are warned not to talk about it, the topic may become more interesting or important.

When people are warned not to talk about it, the topic may become more interesting or important.

For agencies, politicians, and citizens, the most important thing is to learn about what rumors are and what they can convey. If we have that knowledge and experience in practice, we do not need to be affected in the same way by public concerns.

# SCENARIOS FOR TRAINING

**P**reparing for crises before they occur is critical for organizations. If you are well prepared, then you can handle emergencies and crises better and more safely. This requires that those who work with crisis management and crisis communication to have undergone training and to have practiced and carried out qualified planning. Building competence takes time and requires great effort from those who will lead the crisis managing team and be responsible for carrying out crisis communication.

A good way to prepare for crises and to build readiness for real events is to practice based on scenarios. There are several different ways to undertake this practice. For unexperienced crisis managers, it is advantageous to start with smaller exercises to learn how to practice. This is preferably done in small groups with so-called table-top scenarios. The group receives written material that they read and then begin to discuss together. The written scenario could be an unexpected event requiring that the crisis team is formed to handle the crisis, whether a disease outbreak, a school bus accident, a forest fire, a terrorist attack, a financial crisis, or an act of war, to name a few. Some crises that have occurred once are likely to occur again and can provide guidance for the design of a scenario.

A crucial benefit of table-top exercises is that they often contribute to subsequent discussion and encourage the participants to practice further. If the exercise is too complicated and less engaging, then it will be difficult to inspire the desire to continue. This is also a reason why the scenario needs to be perceived as having practical use, resulting in increased competence and the ability of the participants to plan more insightfully for a future crisis and to be able to work operationally with crises, individually, in groups and within a larger organization.

A table-top scenario can be carried out with a game leader. The group appoints one person to take notes and one to report the results and thoughts from the group. When training to manage a rumor situation, the participants need to focus on the aspects of crisis communication and think about the possible emergence of rumor spreading in different communication platforms and digital media. A scenario can have one or more elements. It may be enough to spend about two to three hours on a table-top exercise. If the practicing group has questions, then they can ask the game leader about how to proceed.

When considering a more complex scenario that is based on several phases with unpredictable development of the events, the exercise must be designed to also allow the participants to imagine different outcomes. The training will be particularly useful if the group manages to think through possible ways to work with the different developments in such a scenario and to try to answer the questions. When working with a table-top or more complex scenario, there are no right or wrong solutions to manage future steps about what we do not know. Indeed, the point of these scenarios is that they provide the participants with the ability to handle uncertainty and difficult situations, and to come up with solutions.

Another option is to give the same scenarios to multiple groups and have them complete the task in parallel. Then, the outcomes can be compared. In these cases, it can be striking how similar or different our thoughts are and what steps and measures the groups suggest for designing the crisis communication in the scenario. The reporting phase is also an important learning event when several groups work in parallel: It illustrates different ways to manage the rumors and to design crisis communication. This method can also train appropriate techniques for team collaboration. For unexperienced crisis managers and new crisis teams, it can also be a good way to get to know each other, seeing how different team members react and take on roles during a crisis event. Finally, scenarios are an excellent way to raise awareness of the function of rumors in crises.

Below, we provide four scenarios. Note that all of the names have been made up.



Scanning electromicrograph styled parasitic infection Cryptosporidium.  
Science Picture Co/Alamy Stock Photo.

## Scenario number 1. A source of concern

### MOMENT 1

During the evening, an intense discussion on social media asserts that schools in Uptown will be closed because many students have become ill after drinking the municipal water. Inquiries on Facebook suggest boiling water and not going to school.

In the early local morning TV and radio broadcasts, the headlines suggest that Uptown has been affected by bacteria in their drinking water. The media reports that the municipality and region are working intensively on the issue. They also highlight various online conversations that several people may have become ill due to bacteria. Most of these conversations do not think it is not food poisoning. In fact, a large group believes that drinking water has caused the disease outbreak. A representative from Uptown Waterworks says: “We have taken routine samples and are now waiting for the results. There should be no risk of getting sick if you drink the water. The quality is high. The water itself can smell a little bad and taste like chlorine, but it has nothing to do with the sampling. The smell and taste will decrease during the day and return to normal in parts of Uptown.”

When asked if the water should be boiled to avoid infection, the Uptown Waterworks representative answers: “No boiling of the water is necessary because we do not suspect common bacteria or cryptosporidium.” In a subsequent question about whether cryptosporidium can be ruled out, the Uptown Waterworks representative answers: “There is a difference between wastewater and bacteria.”

Also, that morning, an employee at the Confederation of Middleland Enterprises Uptown writes on X (formerly known as Twitter) that they are not going into the office because they have become ill from the drinking water. A planned network meeting between companies and investors will probably be cancelled.

Furthermore, the infection control physician at Uptown Hospital states: “It is alarming to hear this through media and not directly from those responsible at Uptown water or from those responsible from Uptown municipality that the water may be suspected of being contaminated”.

Soon, a storm of posts on various social media forums begins. Uptown municipality says in a statement that “the samples they have taken are routine and are always done at regular intervals. During the previous night, the water network was flushed

in some places outside Uptown due to a suspected leak in a pipe. The municipality regrets that the information was not released earlier and more clearly.”

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures should be taken by the agency?  
What decisions must be made and by whom?  
How should crisis communication work be conducted?
- Which activities in the region will be directly affected by the event during the first hours?
- Does the region’s management have a role in the incident?
- Are there any plans/instructions to rely on?
- How are the staff in the region notified/alerted?
- What is the role of the region and its communications department?
- What information measures is the region taking?
- What channels for gathering and disseminating vital information exist and are used?
- Who will anxious people try to contact?
- What steps should the communications department take to ensure that the information is accurate?
- Formulate a message/press release that will be distributed the region that is based on the information you have received.
- Who speaks to the media?
- How should you answer the people who call the region?
- What is conveyed in social media from the region?

#### MOMENT 2

In the morning, information comes from several school principals (headmasters) that few students have come to school, especially at primary and middle schools. Moreover, the schools report that many parents have informed them that their children will stay home from school due to the alleged outbreak. Some students bring bottles of boiled water.

The principals say they are surprised that the youngest children did not come to school, while most junior high school students did. Indeed, the junior high school students have posted most intensively on social media that students should not attend school.

In contrast, the high school show extremely high absenteeism. In some classes, students follow the lessons remotely from home via online links. They urge their teachers to stay at home as long as the infection spread uncontrollably. At home, they can boil the water and avoid getting sick. The student council's chairwoman Stina Strong at Uptown High School says the following in an interview with Radio Up 2: "Teaching should be conducted as usual but remotely via Skype or Teams. Attendance will be reported. No one at school, neither students nor teachers should have to suffer from any disease." This interview is widely circulated in various online forums.

The popular and recently retired nurse Maria Johansson posts the following message on Facebook that is liked by many: "If we do not know what is spreading, the hospital, the infection control doctor, and the municipality must encourage people to boil the water. The children are the best we have, and they must not get sick. Wise to conduct distance learning. Luckily, the students take responsibility for their education."

There are various distance learning forums that students can use to participate in their classwork. The forum is run by students at Uptown Upper Secondary School.

Other groups that call themselves *Distancingfromuptown* or *Sickinuptown* and have gained many followers. Many pictures and short videos are shared about the infected water. The pictures show colorful bacteria and people leaning over toilet seats. Several short films are posted on YouTube where young people are urged not to drink the dangerous water in Uptown and the surrounding area.

In kindergartens, the reactions have been varied. Some have closed, but others are open as usual.

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures should you take?
- What decisions must be made and by whom?
- How should crisis communication be conducted?

### MOMENT 3

The regional management in Uptown and Uptown's water agency announce that mistakes have been made and that it is important to boil the water. The test results show that there are higher levels of bacteria than normal in the drinking water. Wastewater had penetrated into the water system.

Many grocery stores announce that they have had a huge demand for water and have therefore ordered more to supply their customers. Klas Jansson, the owner of Appetite-foodstore, posts on Facebook: "Healthy water is available at Appetite-foodstore."

The newly appointed hospital priest Hanna Odinson posts the following on Facebook: "I have asked the municipality why they do not provide different risk groups with clean drinking water. Many older people can become very ill if they drink dirty water. Time for the infection control doctor to wake up." In a post a few minutes later, she writes: "- The Church of Middleland in Uptown, with their members, will organize so that the elderly and disabled get clean water". Many like the post. Several people write that they are happy to put up with running out of water to help those in need. Various companies in the brewing industry also say they want to contribute.

On Facebook and Twitter, many harsh words are directed at the hospital and the municipality. There have been some threats to the Uptown municipality, the Uptown region, and to Uptown Waterworks, which the police take very seriously. Anxiety among the staff has been reported to the municipal management.

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures are you taking?
- What decisions must be made and by whom?
- How should crisis communication work be conducted?

#### COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING TASK:

- Summarize the most important conclusions.

## Scenario Number 2. Run for your life

### MOMENT I

On Saturday morning, 68 teams have gathered for the West Coast Cup 25 football tournament. West coast FC has organized this tournament for many years. This evening, the popular singer Flowie and the rapper Trigger will be giving a concert at the main football ground. The stage is located next to one of the pitches.

Many matches are played on Saturday at the main football ground in central Greentown. There are large crowds of supporters, and the atmosphere is lively. Several security guards and police officers are posted in the surrounding area.

Hamburgers, hot dogs, and soft drinks are served at the end of the day. The preparations for the upcoming concert are developing. Many people have entered the grounds to watch the artists. The host comes on stage and welcomes everyone. The atmosphere is charged and the children chant “WCC-25”. There is a slight commotion by the side of the stage, with several parents and team leaders getting louder and louder. They begin to scream and usher children away from the area. Several parents shout, pointing to a bag that they believe contains something dangerous. Crying children start to run away from the scene. Others walk toward the place where their bags are kept. The host of the concert becomes confused and turns to the person in charge of West Coast FC standing next to him. After some confusion, everyone is asked to leave so the suspicious bag can be searched. At the same time, sirens can be heard as several police cars arrive at the scene. The police begin to cordon off and evacuate the area. The stage is quickly emptied.

Videos of crying children running and police cars sounding their sirens spread on social media, accompanied by text that a bomb has been found next to the stage where Flowie and Trigger are to perform.

### BACKGROUND

You work from home as communication officer for West Coast FC, the city of Greentown, or the police.

### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- How should the crisis communication work be carried out?
- What measures need to be taken?
- Which channels can be used for gathering and spreading essential information?
- What measures can be taken to ensure that the information is accurate?
- Who speaks to the media and what message is to be conveyed?
- What should be communicated on social media?

### MOMENT 2. WATCH OUT – IT'S A BOMB

Police cordons surround a large area around the stage at the main football ground. All bags in the area may not be taken away or even touched. However, the police are slow to clear the area as some team members attempt to take their bags. Many players are annoyed that they are not allowed to retrieve their items, while others say that they should not take any unnecessary risks, feeling that incidents can strike anywhere and anytime.

West Coast FC officials use the loudspeakers to inform everyone that they can return tomorrow, and the tournament will continue. Children, team leaders, and parents leave the football ground and go to their accommodations.

Leaders, children, and parents begin to talk to people from other teams. Many are standing in groups and are frustrated that they cannot gather their belongings. Several people mention that they have heard of threats and drug dealing, but despite this, the football club did not want to cancel the tournament. This information is also spread on social media platforms. Many children write in chats and ask why West Coast FC did not warn them about the bombs.

### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- How should the crisis communication work be conducted?
- What information needs to be shared?
- Which channels are available and can be used for gathering and spreading important information?
- What measures can be taken to ensure that the information is accurate?
- Who speaks to the media and what message is to be conveyed?
- What should be communicated on social media?

### MOMENT 3. WALKOVER TOMORROW

In the evening, the police are alerted to a school in central Greentown to which many team leaders, children, and parents have evacuated. Several parents report that a bag is noticed in a corridor, and nobody knows who owns it. The police close the school and announce that it is unlikely the bomb squad will have time to search the school until the next day.

Later in the evening, several team leaders and parents staying in other schools and sports halls write on Facebook they are abandoning the tournament and going home. They are of the opinion that neither the organizers nor the police can provide adequate security.

The local media reports that the football ground has been evacuated by the police and that the bomb squad is onsite. In interviews with the media, parents report that they have noticed clear shortcomings with security, as access to the area was unrestricted. A quote from one parent is widely spread on social media, stating that it was “shocking to hear how drug dealing could take place out in the open at a football tournament in central Greentown where young children are present.”

Many parents write on the West Coast Cup Facebook page that they will be leaving the following day as they do not feel safe in Greentown.

The police later announce in news reports and on social media that the bomb squad did not find any explosives in the bag. The item was actually a speaker with cables.

Several social media posts report that “fire alarms have been deliberately turned off at all of the schools and sport halls where the children are staying.” There is also talk of “many people seeing bottles of flammable liquid at several schools.” These posts have led to several calls to the fire brigade and the police, asking whether the alarms are in working order and if they can remove bottles of petrol from the site.

**DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

- How should the crisis communication work be conducted?
- What information needs to be shared?
- Which channels are available and can be used for gathering and spreading essential information?
- What measures can be taken to ensure that the information is accurate?
- Who speaks to the media and what message is to be conveyed?
- What should be communicated on social media?

**COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING TASK:**

- Summarize the main conclusions.

## Scenario number 3. What a dry summer!

### MOMENT 1

The beautiful weather continues to hold. May and June have been the warmest in 25 years, and the land is very dry. As a result, a fire ban has been established. Several forest fires have ravaged the country. Most have occurred north of Middleland. The wildfires have involved rescue services and groups of volunteers. However, several rescue services consider the fires to be normal for the hot and dry summer. Preparedness has been increased because there is a risk of rapid spread. The media have drawn attention to the fires locally, but in the national media reporting has been limited. There has been relatively little discussion of the fires on social media. According to the latest weather forecasts, strong westerly winds will start to blow.

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- You work at Cloudburg Municipality's Communications Department. What measures do you take in the municipality?

### MOMENT 2. 12,000 SCOUTS INSIDE THE WILDFIRES

During the day, a fire starts to burn on a farm in the northwestern part of Cloudburg municipality, in Ravens Creek, next to Trolls Falls, and a large number of cows burn inside a barn. The strong wind quickly spreads the fire to a forested area. A scout camp—hosted by Cloudburg and Darkwood municipalities, with 12,000 participants from 31 countries—is taking place in the area. Two days ago, the Middleland president participated in the opening of the scout camp.

The scouts are spread over a large area. The fire spreads quickly, and many of the participants flee. Dozens of scouts scurry to save their equipment. A group of older scouts try unsuccessfully to douse the forest fire. Of these, about 20 are taken to the hospital for burns and smoke inhalation. The younger scouts flee in panic. The scout leaders inform the rescue service and the police that they cannot determine where the scouts are located. The various scout corps have organized themselves to try to find the missing children. A few dramatic images of burnt scouts are spread on various media platforms. In addition, films from the fire become more widespread spreading in the languages of the international scouts.

SOS Alarm service receives the alarm about the burning farm. The rescue service arrives at the scene to fight the fire, but it spreads quickly, and the firefighters are forced to request extensive reinforcements. The injured are taken to the hospital in vehicles at the scout camp and by local ambulances. The police are onsite and have closed the traffic on the road between Blue Mountain and Devil's Pot. Rescue services from surrounding municipalities arrive at the area to participate in controlling the disaster, but the fire expands with the strong wind as the land in the area is very dry.

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures should the communication department take?
- Which activities in the municipality will be directly affected by the event during its first hours?
- Does the municipality's management have a role in the incident?
- Are there any plans/instructions that will serve as guidance?
- How should the staff in the municipality be alerted?
- What is the role of the municipality and its communication department?
- What steps should the communications department take to ensure that the information is accurate?
- Formulate a message/press release to be issued by the municipality based on the information you have received.
- Who should be the spokesperson?
- What should you tell those who contact the municipality?
- What should be conveyed in social media from the municipality?

### MOMENT 3. FOREIGN RESCUE TEAMS ARRIVE

The fire spreads further during the night as the wind increases in strength. Two scouts have already been found dead. About 10,000 scouts huddle at various gathering places. Of these, about 150 are injured by smoke inhalation and are under observation by medical staff. About 300 children are still missing. The hospitals in Cloudburg and Carlsburg are on emergency alert.

Rescue services, medical personnel, and the police receive reinforcements from the West, North, and East. Middleland and international media outlets are on site and describe the fire as an inferno that is spreading with the speed of the wind. On social media such as X, Facebook and Instagram, the situation is trending and seems dire.

Many worried parents call the municipality and wonder what is happening. Several media outlets contact the municipality and want to know what measures have been taken. They also wonder if the county administrative board has taken over operational management for the crisis. The County Administrative Board announces that they are tracking the incident and that they have established a crisis organization.

SOS Alarm states that the forest fires are spreading northeast. Soon rescue teams from arrive at the Cloudburg–Darkwood Airport.

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures should the communication department take?
- How should the community prepare for foreign rescue teams?
- What are the needs and opportunities for cooperation between communities, authorities and organizations?

#### MOMENT 4. EMBASSIES SET UP FIELD OFFICES

At dawn, the fire has spread rapidly in the northwestern part of Cloudburg municipality. The village of Set is hard hit, and the fire has spread to Ellenwood and Long Swamp. Several residential buildings and farms have been ravaged by fire. Residents in the area have been evacuated. Aviation surveys are made more difficult due to the massive amount of smoke. In large neighboring areas, the smoke from the fire is so noticeable that many residents have left their homes spontaneously. Many are wondering where to go and who can save their home if the fire spreads further. The fires are spreading rapidly and extinguishing them is exceedingly difficult. Most residents of the area have been evacuated.

The media reporting is now extensive. Among other things, several outlets show aerial photos of people fleeing and state that more deaths are feared. TV shows images of firefighters running and carrying young scouts out of the fire-ravaged forest. Moreover, there are reports that one possible reason for the fire may be that an electrical fault in the barn. A rumor spreads that scouts played with matches near the yard. None of the versions are commented on by either the rescue service or the police. According to hospital staff in Cloudburg, there are insufficient resources to care for all fire victims.

Several helicopters from other nations join the firefighting rescue. However, the Middleland Maritime Administration's helicopters have been grounded due to technical problems. Several embassies are establishing field offices in Cloudburg and Darkwood.

#### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures should the communications department take?
- How should you prepare for the reception of foreign embassy staff in the municipality?
- Is there an optimal way to share information among the municipality, the health service, and the police, as well as with the other actors involved?

## MOMENT 5. WILDFIRE OVER CLOUDBURG REGION: THE DANGER OF PASSIVE AUTHORITIES

During the afternoon, the fire spreads to such an extent that Cloudburg's Rescue Services Association now admits that it threatens larger parts of the Cloudburg region. Several fire experts expected this to happen.

Seven people have been found dead, including a firefighter from Cloudburg. About 40 people have suffered severe burns and are being cared for in local hospitals. Nearly 250 scouts, residents, and tourists in the area have been taken to gathering places and hospitals. The capacity of the hospitals is strained to the limit. Media coverage describes the fire as the worst in Europe in modern times. It is also reported that the police have arrested several people in the vicinity where the fire occurred, but the police refuse to comment on the arrests.

There are still scouts from several different countries as well as tourists remaining in the area. There is strong criticism about the authorities' passive attitude and at the fact that people were not evacuated in time.

### DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What measures should the communications department take at this point?
- What channels can you use to reach out and get valuable information?
- Which other authorities need information from the municipality?
- Are there needs and opportunities to coordinate information with other actors?
- What can be done to get a "broader view" of the reactions of municipal residents and the media?
- How will the municipality's organization change in the coming weeks?
- How should criticism of the municipality be addressed?



A poultry market in Beijing October 25, 2005. China has reported a fresh outbreak of bird flu as fears grow across the world of an impending pandemic, a senior U.N. official said on Tuesday. Photo by Claro Cortes/REUTERS/TT-bild.

## Scenario Number 4. The bird-flu has landed

For several months, an aggressive bird flu has been spreading in Southeast Asia. The infection has mainly struck people who live in rural areas. Mortality among humans has been higher than expected. There are different opinions about the death toll and the reasons for the spread of the infection. Extensive resources from the World Health Organization (WHO) have been invested in the area to deal with the situation.

The infection has spread faster to Europe than various international bodies and expert groups thought was likely. The infection has also spread in imported birds, including chickens. Forecasts predicted that the infection would come somewhat later than it has. The WHO worries that some European Union agencies have reacted too slowly. In contrast, the European Union believes that the WHO has been too alarmist, evident in the frightening portrayed via the media. Nevertheless, the bird flu has become a major issue on the political agenda for a brief period. However, concern about avian influenza has not been as great in Europe as it was during the previous bird flu and swine flu epidemics.

In Middleland, this disease has now been found in various bird species as well as imported meat, an increasing concern. Government authorities have been following the problem for some time. Soon, concern among citizens increases, and the public pressure intensifies. Media reporting is dominated by accounts of the bird flu. Fortunately, the authorities have communicated with the public during the period, and these efforts have partially stabilized the concerns. Still, health experts have widely differing views, evident in reports from a variety of national and international bodies as well as among faculty at university medical schools. The WHO, meanwhile, has suffered badly from a crisis of confidence that has undermined its leadership.

In Middleland, the responsible authorities working with the government have now admitted that the infection has arrived here faster than feared and that powerful measures must now be taken.

## DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- How should the national veterinary institute and the Middleland Board of Agriculture assess the situation in the coming days/week/month from a communication perspective once the bird-flu has arrived in Middleland?
- Who has the responsibility to define the situation?
- What is the proper way to define the situation?
- What type of decisions are required for cooperation and coordination of communication among those authorities with distinct areas of responsibility for coping with the disease?
- What information should the national veterinary institute and the Middleland Board of Agriculture provide the public with and how should it be provided?
- Who reviews the information before it reaches the public? Who is “responsible” for sharing information?
- How are situations managed if the information communicated to citizens is unclear or not comprehensible?
- How does cooperation with other authorities within the crisis management system take place? Which authority is responsible?
- How do the authorities interact with the political structure in the government with regard to press conferences?
- How is information about risks conveyed?
- What types of physical measures should be taken, such as breeding or handling birds? How are these communicated?
- How is responsibility for action communicated? Which authority has the main responsibility?
- How are studies and research results communicated?
- Who prepares information to be shared on the local level? How do they do this?
- Who should be appointed as the key spokesperson for addressing the media?

# GLOSSARY

## OF WORDS, CONCEPTS, AND DEFINITIONS

There is a rich tapestry of words, concepts, and definitions associated with rumors, crisis communication, and related areas. Some occur more often and have also been given different meanings than what they represent. These concepts are based on the meanings of words and established definitions in subject areas such as media and communication science, rhetoric, social psychology, sociology, folklore, and political science. The meaning of the words has mainly been obtained through dictionaries and from research. Several words have a long history, and others have been coined recently. Several originate from Greek and Latin, which means that they are found in other languages with the same or similar meanings.



Flora of rumors. Illustration by Riber Hansson, Sweden.

**A**

**Alternative facts:** Deficient data that are presented as correct information, even though they contradict the facts that exist in the area. (See also: facts.)

**Ambiguity:** Ambiguous messages, words, or sentences can have several different meanings. When working with crisis communication, one often tries to avoid ambiguity and to increase clarity and to limit the number of interpretations. However, ambiguity can also be a successful strategy—for example, when facing an uncertain situation and there is a need to avoid blocking alternative actions. This was the case during the 2008 financial crisis, when the Swedish Central Bank, Riksbanken, used ambiguity as a strategy.

**Anecdote:** A short, playful story about a person and his or her actions. Many anecdotes have a comic ending to attract laughter. The word comes from the Greek *anek´dotos* and refers to writing that has not been published and that builds on oral stories.

**Anxiety, collective/social:** (Anxious)

**C**

**Campaign:** An effort that aims to intensively exert influence over a period of time with specific content targeted at a particular group. An example is a political campaign that reaches out with a message on as many occasions as possible. A campaign uses several different methods to achieve its goal, including social media, posters, “flyers,” and speeches in public places. Formerly used to talk about election propaganda. Running a campaign is synonymous with promoting something. The word comes from the French *campaign*. (See also: propaganda.)

**Canard (“newspaper duck”):** In some cultures, a duck has come to symbolize the role of the one who carries lies or false rumors. In Swedish contexts, the term is used when, for example, a daily newspaper publishes something that does not turn out to correspond to reality. The newspaper often receives a great deal of attention, which forces the responsible publishers to admit the mistake and, in the worst case, apologize. The term newspaper duck came to Sweden in the 19th century from France, where a duck is called a *canard*. In France, the concept is well established and a satirical paper, *Canard*, amuses the French.

**Communication:** An action that involves spreading information, that is, content with facts, knowledge, and arguments that contribute to making an issue widely known. The Latin word *communicare* means to do something in common. (See also: information.)

**Conspiracy:** A conspiracy concerns the act of conspiring, that is, to act in harmony toward a common end. This action often involves pursuing a hidden purpose or fulfilling a secret agreement, which may be an unlawful act or an act that becomes unlawful as a result of a secret agreement.

**Conspiracy theory:** A theory that explains a set of circumstances or an event that is a result of a secret plot by usually powerful actors. It can also refer to a theory asserting that a secret of great importance is being kept from the public by elites.

**Credibility:** Credibility is often equated with the trustworthiness of a communicator. While plausibility refers to the content of the claim, credibility refers to the reputation of the speaker. (See also: plausibility.)

**Crisis:** The word crisis comes from the Latin *cri'sis* and the Greek *kri'si* which means to divide or decide. The word was once used about the phase in a disease course, which involves a decisive turn for better or worse. It is virtually impossible to capture all aspects of a crisis in a simple definition. Here, a crisis is seen as a situation that overwhelms society's problem-solving resources, which threatens to crumble society's control system, and thereby can cause everyday life for many people to collapse. The main characteristics of a crisis include: It arises quickly, it involves many actors, decisions must be made under severe time pressure and great uncertainty, and the media both participate in and describe it. The type of crisis we are preparing for here can be, for example, a flood, interruption in the electricity supply, gas clouds, or precipitation of radioactive substances. It can also be caused by groups deliberately provoking through, for example, terrorism, sabotage, boycotts or data breaches. A crisis can also arise through mismanagement, fraud, or a change in values and behaviors.

**Crisis communication:** Crisis communication refers to society's communicative ability. In the event of emergencies and crises, this means that authorities convey fast and accurate information to victims, those affected, and the public, as well as to the media. Crisis communication is about communicating with and to a group of citizens or a wider public on a collective level. Crisis communication is also about the coordination of information that takes place internally and between

authorities, organizations, the media, and interested individuals and groups, before, during, and after a crisis. The task of those responsible for crisis communication is to create a common exchange of opinions about the accident or crisis. Crisis communication is conducted before an event in planning processes, training, and exercises to be conducted during a crisis or emergency in accordance with the requirements and expectations of governments and publics. The crisis communication work must last for an extended period if the situation requires. Follow-up work in the event of emergency and crises often requires extensive efforts.

## D

**Debunk/Debunking:** This verb is often used in connection with debunking rumors, suggesting that the claims are false. There are certain websites that work with fact-checking and actively work on rumor debunking.

**Delusion:** Something falsely believed or propagated, including the act of tricking or deceiving someone who is deluded. The term is also used within psychology because it can also be a persistent false belief regarding the self or people or objects that is maintained despite definitive evidence to the contrary.

**Denial:** A denial claims that a statement is not true. We often associate denial with when a representative from a government, a company, or an organization—but also private citizens—communicate in public that what is alleged in the media or in conversations is not correct. It is often said that someone wants to dispute, deny, or disprove what has emerged.

**Disinformation:** Disinformation refers to the practice of intentionally transmitting false or misleading information. The word *dis-* comes from Latin and means apart. (See also: information.)

## F

**Fact:** Fact is a term that describes whether different conditions should be perceived as true or false. Facts are often equated with something that is correct, tried, and tested, but also something that is difficult to dispute. The concept is based on objective and subjective values according to philosophical reasoning. In newspapers, we see fact boxes that assume they have a high degree of reliability. The word is comes from Latin (*factum*).

**Fact resistance:** Fact resistance means that individuals or groups resist facts about the world around us, such as statistics on violent crime, vaccine effects or climate change. These individuals are not influenced by facts that contradict their own beliefs even if these facts are true.

**Factoid:** Factoid is a compound word—fact and oid—meaning something that appears to be a fact but is not. The word oid, *eidōs* in Latin, means image and appearance.

**Fake news:** False stories that appear to be legitimate news stories. They are often spread on the Internet or on social media and are often created to influence political views or intended to be a joke. Fake news is a common term in news reporting. The word fake news has gained a sliding meaning for things that have been rejected whether they have appeared in the news media, research, or from other actors. Fake news can be news that is untrue and spreads as if it were accurate. (See also: truth.)

**Folklore:** The collection of traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community that are passed through the generations by word of mouth.

## G

**Grapevine:** An informal concept for rumors that are spread among people. “I’d heard through the grapevine” is a common utterance in conversations.

**Gossip:** Gossip is closely related to rumors and can be described as fresh news that is conveyed to one or a select few. It should give the feeling that you are the one who first got the knowledge but is not allowed to spread it further, which is done anyway. It is usually targeted at particular people. Of note, some gossip is accurate.

## H

**Hearsay:** What people claim about topics of which they have no direct knowledge.

**Hoax:** An act intended to trick or dupe; it can also be something established by fraud or fabrication.

## I

**Influence:** Influence involves persuading a person to change or strengthen their position in the desired direction through persuasion. It can also mean getting a person to perform different actions or to influence others' perceptions. Influence can take place in several ways through political and religious associations, by authorities, organizations, and companies. What they want to achieve is often a change in behavior and attitude. This can be about getting people to quit smoking, vote for a political party, or join a radicalized pro-violence group. The concept should be seen as neutral. Influence can also take place via lobbying, as representatives of a group want to influence political decision-makers. There are a few different sub-concepts that are used in the military area. (See also: communication, influence campaign, influence operation, information, information influence, information operations, information warfare, psy ops, and psychological warfare.)

**Influence campaign:** An influence campaign is centrally controlled at the same time as a broad spectrum of channels are used, both open and hidden. It can include political, diplomatic, economic and military means, both open and covert, to achieve the greatest possible effect. Official spokespeople present messages that are coordinated with news dissemination in the media. It can be supplemented with false documents; slander; threats, including those by military means; demonstrations of strength; and covert operations such as fictitious people in social media, fake documents, front organizations, or planted news.

**Influence operation:** Influence operation is an overarching concept that involves various tools: influence campaign, information influence, information operations, information warfare, psy ops, and psychological warfare.

**Information:** Information touches on the meaningful content of what is communicated (communicare) and gives a common meaning. Information is the content and arguments that are communicated. The word comes from the Latin *informa* 'tio. (See also: communication.)

**Information influence:** The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) defines this term as: "Activities conducted by foreign powers, or antagonistic actors, in order to influence the perceptions, behaviors and decision-making of different target groups. The information impact exploits the vulnerability of society and can challenge the life and health of the population, the functionality of society, our fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights and freedoms or other national interests." (See also: persuasion.)

**Information operations:** According to the Swedish Armed Forces' Handbook Information Operations from 2008, the term is defined as: "With information operations, the effect on the information arena is coordinated by influencing data and information in order to influence the opponent's or other actors' actions, while at the same time protecting their own activities in the information arena." Information operations are an overarching concept in the United States and within NATO, and the concept of information warfare is included. (See also: persuasion.)

**Information warfare:** Information operations (see above) are conducted during crises and wars to promote or achieve specific political or military objectives against one or more adversaries. Information warfare involves acts directed at an adversary to protect, distort or destroy information and information dissemination equipment. (See also: persuasion.)

**Insinuation:** To insinuate means, a cautious approach with a statement. "To lay in someone's lap" without the person receiving it, cannot defend themselves from the statement that the rumors contain. However, the word also means that someone wants to adjust to someone. The concept has existed since ancient times and is something that should be taken lightly in, for example, trials because it lacks evidence. Insinuation is a neutral concept in many contexts but can be perceived as accusatory. The word comes from the Latin *insinuatio*.

## L

**Lie:** A lie is a deliberate and recognized falsehood. Anyone who presents a lie likely has an intention to hide something or to get someone to accept the content.

## M

**Malign information:** Malign information is a claim that causes or is intended to cause harm or evil. Malign information is a complex threat, often involving foreign actors who engage with global audiences in online spaces. Foreign malign influence is defined as subversive, undeclared, coercive, or criminal activities by foreign governments, other actors, or proxies to affect another nation's popular or political attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors to advance their interests.

**Memes:** A meme or an Internet meme is an element passed from one individual to another, copied and spread rapidly by Internet users. It consists of an image, a video, and/or a piece of text that is typically humorous in nature, often disseminated with slight variations.

**Misinformation:** Misinformation refers to incorrect information spread without intention. It may also be the case that the person who disseminates the information is not aware that the information is incorrect. The concept should not be confused with disinformation about the deliberate dissemination of false information. The term misinformation is a common term in media and communication research. (See also: disinformation and information.)

**Misleading:** Misleading advertising is what we mainly associate with the concept. In some cases, it is a matter of us being tempted to start reading about the offer and which we must perceive as advantageous, and we complete the purchase before we have considered our choice. The content can often be communicated orally by a salesperson or through advertising. What characterizes deception is that it confuses and misleads, which leads us to make ill-considered decisions. Misleading also has military significance when the purpose is to confuse the enemy to distract them from making favorable decisions.

**Myth:** A myth is a recurring tale/story about the actions of the gods and supernatural phenomena. The Nordic and Greek myths are examples. A myth is closely linked to a tale/story about an act such as the Creation Story or about natural phenomena. It can also be about symbolic rites. Myth is often used incorrectly as if it refers to a false story or a general misconception. A myth does not claim to be true or false.

## N

**Narrative:** Narrative refers to a tale/story after the Latin *narratio*. The narrative should give a clear and credible representation of an event. The word has established itself in recent years in debates and in media reporting. Unfortunately, the word has taken on a negative connotation as it is associated with undemocratic states or with organizations on the political fringes and their propaganda activities. (See also: tale/story.)

## O

**Oral traditions/stories:** Memories, knowledge, and expressions held in common by a group over generations; it refers to the preservation of cultural knowledge that is passed on through vocal utterance.

**P**

**Plausibility:** The quality or state of being empirically possible, in the sense of appearing worthy of belief. (See also: credibility.)

**Propaganda:** Propaganda refers to argumentation to try to convince or persuade. It can be done in several different ways such as through education, speech, advertising, and indoctrination. Various means should be used for propaganda to achieve its goal. The word became best known after the Catholic Church decided in 1622 to establish the Congregatio de propaganda fide (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith). Simply put, it was the Catholic Church's communication strategy for how their faith would benefit more people. Propaganda comes from Latin propagare and means spread and promote. (See also: communication, influence, and information.)

**Psychological warfare:** An aspect of information warfare where one deliberately uses human psychology to influence the views, attitudes, decisions, and behavior of a selected target group. It is usually divided into propaganda, disinformation, and rumors. The concept is mostly used by the military.

**Public concern (collective/social):** Public concern is the collective and social concern that arises among people in society during emergencies and crises. It is a collective common reaction. The public's reaction to the fact that something serious has happened is natural. When people become upset or angry, it is also a natural reaction. When public concern arises, it shows that citizens are alert, want to know more, and are ready to act. It also means that they create interest and engagement. However, public concern can also lead to citizens to contact the relevant agencies and other actors in society when they are concerned. Citizens' public interactions via various chats and other established channels is also an example of citizens wanting to know and get accurate information. Public concern commands fast and correct crisis communication.

**Q**

**Q and A:** Questions and answers. An FAQ is a compiled list of frequently asked questions.

**R**

**Reliability:** The quality of being trustworthy or of performing consistently well.

**Reputation:** Reputation refers to someone's fame and positive appreciation or the opposite. Sometimes we talk about someone having a bad reputation. It comes from the Latin *reputatio*.

**Rumors:** Topical claims sponsored by uncertain information. Also refers to unconfirmed claims.

**Rumor control:** Rumor control (center) is a function that sometimes appears in an organization. It hitherto have existed mostly in the United States. It is used during major crises when there is a lot of uncertainty and inaccurate information flows in ways that may be harmful for public safety.

## S

**Slander:** A word for negative gossip, typically spread by word-of-mouth. The word has a negative connotation as it can be about defaming a person. There are other similar terms such as "tittle-tattle."

**Source criticism:** Source criticism is a scientific method that has been applied in history, the legal system, and journalism. The method assesses information and the credibility of the statements, exposes errors and shortcomings, and discovers its origin. Source criticism is about presenting the level of truth in different information and what can be considered probable. (See also: rumor control.)

**Speculation:** Speculation is about fantasizing freely and devising scenarios where there are no direct answers. The word comes from the Latin *speculatio* and means to consider, observe, and explore. Speculation is a neutral concept that has come to have a negative connotation. It is sometimes said that speculation replaces actual knowledge through ill-considered guesses. Speculation is often linked to a specific event and has no fixed story/narrative structure, but it is linked to a current topic of interest. The one who performs the speculation does not have to believe in what is being performed; rather, they want to express it in order to get a reaction.

## T

**Tale/story:** An oral tale/story is linked to the origin of how communication occurred among people in groups. Fairy tales, myths, and folk beliefs have emerged from this process. Tales have been spread for thousands of years in several contexts. Today, a tale/story is present in the literature and media. For a tale/story to maintain interest among people, it is essential to create drama. (See also: narrative.)

**Troll factory:** A troll factory or troll farm is an institutionalized group of Internet trolls that seek to shape political opinions and decision-making. This can be disinformation propaganda activities often concealed under an inconspicuous name. The operations are usually focused on the political or economic sphere. A troll factory uses fake news and hate speech, among other means, to achieve its goals.

**Trolling:** A troll is a person who provokes disputes, for example, by raising controversial topics or attacking other participants online.

**Truth:** Truth is relative and a central philosophical concept. It is often said that what is true today may not be so tomorrow. The truth is therefore provisional. (See also: false.)

## U

**Urban legends:** Also called urban myths, urban legends are a common, contemporary form of folklore. These stories are brief with dramatic and emotionally laden content. An urban legend is defined as an often lurid story or anecdote that is based on hearsay and widely circulated as true. Urban legends have been used to confirm moral standards, to reflect prejudices, or to make sense of collective anxieties. Other similar concepts are modern legends or just legends—folklorists have used all these terms. In general, urban legends comprise a genre of folklore that references unusual (sometimes scary) or humorous events that are widely believed to be plausible. In the past, these legends were often circulated orally. Currently, they are spread via all kinds of media, including social media, discussion boards, and email. Some urban legends have lasted decades with only minor changes to adapt to social events or regional variations. Some urban legends are developed stories with a plot and characters. They often have compelling content including elements of mystery, shock, horror, fear or humor. They may also include paranormal or supernatural elements. One of the most famous in Sweden is “the rat in the pizza.” (See also: rumors.)

## V

**Viral communication:** Viral communication involves text that spreads rapidly, often on the Internet or through social media. In common discourse, the word viral is used to refer to the rapid spread of communicable diseases.

**W**

**White, gray, and black propaganda:** In white propaganda, the producer of the material is clearly marked and indicated. In gray propaganda, information and messages do not have a clear producer, but the source is ambiguous or implicit. Material of unknown origin leaves the recipient unable to determine the creator or motives behind them. Black propaganda involves material created by one group but attributed to another. It falsely claims a message or image was created by an opposing party to discredit them. It is a particularly deceptive form of propaganda. (See also: propaganda.)

**Word of mouth:** Spoken communication between individuals.

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## RUMORS ON THE AGENDA – MANAGING PUBLIC CONCERN THROUGH CRISIS COMMUNICATION

*Rumors on the Agenda* is the first guide to informal discussion and misinformation that addresses how crisis communication helps communities deal with uncertain information during, after, and even prior to a crisis. Based on academic knowledge and government expertise, readers learn strategies for improving responses to dangerous and ambiguous situations. Acceptance of rumor depends on the plausibility of its claims and the credibility of its sources. This can lead to sound or misguided action. Filled with case studies that permit readers to think through their own responses, this book is of value not only for communication professionals, but for the wider public.

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