Returning to Rumoring

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Our information ecosystems are “wired” for the spread of false and misleading content — especially during crisis events.

Challenges for Crisis Communicators and Responders

- Information Speed and Overload
- Diverse Platforms, New Gatekeepers, Participatory Audiences
- Diminished Trust
- Whether and When to Correct

problematic information

misinformation

bots

propaganda

influence operations

fake news

midinformation

astroturf

infodemic

MDM

disinformation

information operations

conspiracy theory

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Misinformation

Information that is false, but not necessarily intentionally false.

Disinformation

False or misleading information that is purposefully seeded and/or spread for a specific objective — e.g. financial or political.

Rumors

Unofficial and/or unverified information transmitted through informal networks (Kapferer, 1990)

Rumors tend to proliferate in situations where there is a lack of trusted, official information

Rumors can emerge as a byproduct of collective sensemaking that occurs as people come together to try to resolve ambiguity and uncertainty (Shibutani, 1966)

Rumors can turn out to be true or false — or somewhere in between

Rumors "Rumors do not *take off from* the truth, but rather *seek out* the truth." (Kapferer, 1990)

False rumors are misinformation.

Disinformation campaigns can seed new rumors or strategically amplify existing rumors.

Why Rumors?

1. Allow you to start working — and communicating — about an emergent claim or narrative before you can determine veracity or intent. (Preserves trust.)
2. Rumors can be informative. (Increases Situational Awareness)
3. Using “rumor” positions the audience as potentially contributing to situational awareness and can give them agency in the response (Builds trust.)

A Framework for Assessing Rumor Vulnerability

To correct or not to correct, that is the question.

Information Conditions	**Uncertainty**	Uncertainty powers the rumor mill. As events (infections, train wrecks, elections) unfold, uncertainty will drive the generation and spread of rumors. For specific rumors, ambiguity of evidence will lead to more spread.
	Diminished Trust	Diminished trust in “official” information providers (government, media, etc.) pushes people towards more informal communication channels, catalyzing rumoring.
Contextual Features	**Significance / Impact**	The strength of a specific rumor is proportional to its importance in the lives of those spreading it. Events with greater potential impact on people’s lives will catalyze more, and more viral, rumors.
	Familiarity / Repetition	A common set of building blocks underly many rumors, which may make them easier to construct and spread. This, plus repetition, increases familiarity plus plausibility and boosts spread.
	Compellingness of Evidence	Evidence that piques interest and adds tangibility — e.g. first-person accounts, photos, and videos — will catalyze the creation and enhance virality of rumors
	Emotional Valence	Rumors that stimulate strong emotions — including anger, fear, and outrage — will be more likely to spread. Events that stimulate strong emotions may catalyze the creation of viral rumors.
	Novelty	People spread rumors to inform and entertain. Rumors with novel elements will spread further. Crises and other emergent events provide novel content that can be assembled into rumors.
	Participatory Potential	Rumors that allow people to participate — e.g. to add evidence or interpretations — are likely to spread further.
Systems Effects	**Position w/in the Social Network**	Social networks shape the spread of rumors. Rumors will spread further when they reach central or high-audience nodes in a network or when they move from one network to another.
	Inauthentic Amplification / Algorithmic Manipulation	In online environments, rumors can be intentionally seeded or spread for strategic gain. Often, those efforts game underlying networks and recommendation systems

A Framework for:

Assessing the Potential Virality of a Specific Rumor

OR

Assessing How an Anticipated or Emerging Event Could Drive Rumoring

2010 Deepwater Horizon Oilspill

Information Conditions	**Uncertainty**	EXTREMELY HIGH. Lengthy period of uncertainty — about how much and how long oil would leak, and how it would impact the environment. Initial efforts to stop the spill failed, increasing uncertainty and anxiety.
	Diminished Trust	HIGH. Public confusion about who was responsible for prevention and clean-up of oil spills, combined with existing distrust in both the U.S. government and BP, the oil company who owned the well. Public statements by the CEO of BP contributed to distrust.
	Significance / Impact	EXTREMELY HIGH. People in the affected areas (and beyond) faced potentially catastrophic environmental, financial, and health impacts. Rumors relied upon and exaggerated potential impacts.
	Familiarity / Repetition	MEDIUM. Rumors and conspiracy theories built upon stories about past events (e.g. the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989) and invoked other stories about corrupt and/or exploitative
	Novelty	HIGH. Continuous impacts — with oil washing up on beaches, covering wildlife, and causing harm to communities — created a stream of new material for rumors and conspiracy theories.
	Participatory Potential	HIGH. Social media platforms were growing in relevance, providing pathways for affected people to share written accounts and photos — as well as rumors — with global audiences. Crowdsourcing efforts collected evidence of impacts
Systems Effects	**Position w/in the Social Network**	INCREASING. Initially, the spill was widely covered by national & local media, drawing attention, but also helping to mitigate rumors. Over time, activists & locals gained influence and became central nodes in the spread of personal stories, photos, and rumors.
	Influence Operations	MEDIUM. Evidence of bots, astroturfing of political messaging (often amplifying rumors) as well as foreign disinformation campaigns (including articles on gray propaganda sites).

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	Compellingness of Evidence	HIGH. Locals shared photos of oil-covered wildlife and beaches, and first-person accounts, describing impacts as they walked their local beaches. Activists recorded videos documenting impacts to beaches and communities.
	Emotional Valence	VERY HIGH. Emotions (e.g. fear, anger, sadness) were high, especially for those who lived near the affected areas — and who were experiencing devastating effects to places they loved. Many rumors played on fear, anger, frustration, and outrage.
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Take-Aways

- Online environments are increasingly “wired” for the spread of false, misleading, and/or unsubstantiated content.
- Returning to a “rumoring” perspective may support crisis communicators in more effective responses — and in rebuilding trust.
- A 10-item framework for assessing rumoring in fast-paced, high-staked information environments

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