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Rumor, Social Contagion, and Truth: Not So Strange Political Bedfellows

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Abstract. This article describes the shared epistemological foundations of the political communication of rumor and truth.

One common focus of journalism focuses on belief in what may not be the truth. For example, The New York Times recently has reported on India's monkey-man that allegedly can leap across rooftops, scratches others with long, poisoned metal claws, and vanishes into thin air. The report is founded on the premise that there is no monkey-man and is replete with explanations why such a belief arises and persists. Attributions for belief include (1) "coming from [the] subconscious [and] fear of the unknown;" (2) providing positive social consequences however unintended--such as impeding burglaries because so many people have stopped sleeping at night and, instead, are guarding their homes or stopping nighttime electricity cuts to impede attacks; and implicitly (3) explaining the unexplained or making the unknown known.

Other attributions about other rumors and so-called false beliefs often include (1) illusory correlation of data; (2) non-illusory correlation that nevertheless ignores or discounts important intermediary, intervening, causal, and other contextual data about communication content; (3) the satisfaction of needs; (4) the compatibility with pre-existing beliefs including beliefs about how one should approach believing; (5) projection of the ego-dystonic onto other people or events; and (6) a host of variables involving the interaction of source, content, and target/recipient characteristics.

Ultimately, the attributions for belief in rumor and embracing so-called false belief are based on combinations of five epistemological pathways. One may rely on the belief of some authority. Or one may believe because one should believe via faith in that very belief. Or yet again, one might believe based on manipulations of what passes for rationality and logic. In addition, one might rely on empiricism--as in seeing is believing. Finally, one might take the elegant route of empiricism via systematic handling of data through experimentalism.

A problem for those who seek to separate rumor from truth--beyond the fact that some rumor may, indeed, be truth--is that all the above attributions and epistemological tenets seem to apply equally to both rumor and truth. Even the social contagion that often is cited in spreading falsehood can as robustly spread the truth.

One is left, then, with several possible conclusions about political--or any other--beliefs. There is no objective reality over which to contemplate. There is an objective reality, but one that cannot be accessed. There is an objective reality that can be accessed, but only unpredictably so that one cannot know when access has or has not occurred. The history of political violence over competing truths becomes a history founded on the grounds of ontological fragility.

So, what should one believe in the political world? The answer is the truth, but the truth may set one free as easily as it can be determined. (See Bordia, P. (1996). Studying verbal interaction on the Internet: The case of rumor transmission research. Behavior Research Methods, Instruments and

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Computers, 28, 149-151; Dugger, C.W. (May 19, 2001). Beware monkey-man, scourge of the gullible. The New York Times, p. A4; Jones, T.F., Craig, A.S., Hoy, D., Gunter, E.W., Ashley, D.L., Barr, D.B., Brock, J.W., & Schaffner, W. (2000). Mass psychogenic illness attributed to toxic exposure at a high school. New England Journal of Medicine, 342, 96-100; Nail, P.R., & Whitney, B. (1999). On the distinction between behavioral contagion, conversion conformity, and compliance conformity. North American Journal of Psychology, 1, 87-94; Pendleton, S.C. (1998). Rumor research revisited and expanded. Language and Communication, 18, 69-86; Rosnow, R.L. (1991). Inside rumor: A personal journey. American Psychologist, 46, 484-496.)(Keywords: Rumor, Social Contagion, Truth.)