

How Idle is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research

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Introduction

Rumor and the unknown

This paper examines the stability of the concept of rumor in the past century. It is suggested that not only do models of explanation change, but rumors themselves also change – not just in content, but perhaps in the way they are believed or disbelieved. Social scientific interest in rumors begins with the birth of modern psychology in the 19th century, shifts to social psychology and sociology in mid-20th century, prompted by governmental concern over subversion through rumor during the Second World War, and is finally revived by folklorists in more recent decades. Understood variously as a conduit of the unconscious and otherwise unendorsable thoughts, a mundane communication drift, or an intentional form of deception and provocation, many of our rumor model assumptions are drawn from that era and remain basically unchallenged. A central assumption emerged that ambiguous situations create a vacuum which rumor fills. By the late 1960s, despite a decline in social scientific interest in the topic, a handful of significant empirical and theoretical challenges emerge from scattered studies. The discipline of folklore begins to take more interest in contemporary rumor in the 1970s, and by the early 1990s the rubric of the rumor is almost entirely supplanted in English language scholarship by the ‘urban legend’ (Brunvand, 1981).

While the social construction of rumor among scholars has not been static over the decades, neither has the object of scrutiny itself – the rumor – as a quotidian practice. I aim to argue that the best evidence suggests that ambiguity surrounding rumors is often actively developed and imputed by interlocutors themselves, and self-consciously subjective relationships to information are a more relevant explanation than gullibility or what Chorus describes as a lack of critical capacity (1953).

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Particular attention can and should be paid, in contemporary analysis, to the general information environment, the politics of belief, and cultural shifts in ideas about truth and falsity.

Fall and rise of scholarly interest in rumor

It is a hopeful sign that within the last few years there has been a small resurgence (see Bordia, 1996; Fine and Turner, 2001; Heath, Bell and Sternberg, 2001; Fine, Champion-Vincent and Heath, 2005) in the area of 'general' rumor research after a long decline. Until now there has been a distinct debunking tone taken by those who have ventured into the field after the early 1970s (Best, 1990; Glassner, 1999; Fine and Turner, 2001) which implicitly regards the academic audience itself as potentially credulous.

What is notable is this tone's contrast with that of the mid-century research cited above, where the implied audience is assumed to be skeptical and is addressed as a potentially rumor-defusing, opinion-leading public. I do not think the contemporary tone is a mistake; I would venture to guess that it is based on these authors' frustrating experiences in discussing their work with colleagues whose profession is supposed to make them less gullible. Having engaged in similar debunking activities, I began to think, quite simply, about how people made decisions about what they believed and what they didn't.¹

Also for consideration is whether the rumor is what it used to be. Klapp (1972: 248–9) suggests that rumor, far from being a timeless form with a timeless function, may instead serve each historical circumstance differently, specifically now providing an overmediated yet suspicious society with a momentary shot at defining reality autonomously.

It is ironic that rumor scholarship in social science declined precisely when *popular* interest in urban legends increased, and when a genre-transforming conduit – the internet – became widely accessible. Compared to the enthusiasm of the academy for the subject in the mid-20th century, interest in the study of rumors has dramatically waned. Knopf (1975: 11) suggests that the difficulty in documenting rumor and related genres has likely discouraged social science research. It may also be that this decline stemmed from a paralysis that is methodologically driven: the impact of rumor is not easily 'measured'. Rumor studies thus fit poorly into the social sciences' self-imposed intellectual deformities these days. Yet, ironically, quantitative approaches in North American scholarship have also lagged (Fine, 1992: 144). This fact may be more than the result of loss of interest: one could measure the prevalence of certain rumors, as researchers in France have done (Kapferer, 1989), but it is not always clear what insights could be gleaned from the results, as conceptually speaking we do not know what proportion of the public (general or community-specific) would need to have heard or passed along a given rumor for it to be considered socially meaningful.

Because rumors circulate largely through informal means – widely, cyclically and anonymously – their meaning cannot be exclusively linked to specific local strains and anxieties, nor can it be said that groups within society develop and promulgate

legends independently. Documentation of nearly every rumor abounds with examples of the way in which the same rumor is adapted for diverse audiences, not only in North America but in some cases globally. Recent analysis of specific rumors, usually in the form of urban legends, tends to be limited to one of two approaches: either a narrative analysis focusing on the content of the rumor, or an analysis of the importance of the rumor to a specific group.

Too close a focus on the content of rumors may obscure the significance of rumor as a form, and its dynamic place in information ecology. With Ben-Amos (1982) and others, I question the assumption that 'permanent forms' can be assumed in folklore genres. Informal information conduits have differential situational value to believers (and skeptics). There are cultural and social contexts in which word-of-mouth information is consumed, which can be examined both empirically (studies of specific interlocutory contexts) and speculatively (within the broader context of contemporary information ecology). These alternatives are just two of the possible approaches, when rumor is understood as a purposive social practice and not just a vessel for a text.

The involvement of mid-century rumor researchers in the related practice of 'rumor control' also reflects an era of striking epistemological confidence and cultural authority that itself had broken apart by the 1960s. Indeed, Neubauer (1999: 6) associates the whole notion of rumor control with the need 'to defend the dwindling social center from the increasing growth of the periphery'. Perhaps this is why critical scrutiny of rumor may be met with some academic reticence. In the United States in particular, academics may see themselves as aligned with the periphery and thus may hope for rumor as a kind of holdout, or organic anti-system moment. But empirically speaking, it is an error to associate rumor with this kind of resistance, as there are plenty of rumors in the center, among elites, and many popular ones are even frankly retrograde.

Yet social scientists have been entirely too preoccupied with debunking rumors themselves. While debunking is often necessary, especially with those rumors that sustain fear and hatred, this stance has tended to cause scholars to address themselves exclusively to the credulous and explain to them that they should know better. There is a need to return to a more general level of inquiry about rumor.

Definitions and formal distinctions

The tendency in colloquial usage to assign 'rumor' the role of being a metaphor for *falsity* or *distortion* contributes to the problem of understanding rumor as a social practice. An alternative definition is offered and relied upon here. While rumors may share some characteristics with other forms such as legends, myths, gossip, hoaxes and conspiracy theories, there are important distinctive qualities of rumors. They have been treated as distinctive forms in social science and folklore literature, for the most part, with good reason. Rumors act like news, but are distinguished by being primarily disseminated outside the auspices of formal media or formal organizational authority. Thus, there is nothing in the definition of rumor that absolutely requires the content to be false.

So-called *urban legends* are reasonably understood to be a subgenre of rumor. Urban legends involve rumors that have demonstrated longevity, characterized by at least one episode of reincarnation (a dramatic shift of places, names, dates, motifs) as well as resistance to debunking.

Rumor should also be distinguished from the *hoax*. Hoaxes are intentionally perpetrated or disseminated, whereas rumors are often complicated by the sincerity of the promulgators. Some rumors may of course begin their lives as lies, that is to say, knowingly inaccurate information passed along with the aim of deception. Most who study such forms have observed that the vast majority of dissemination is done sincerely: the promulgator believes that what they are saying is true.

Gossip tends to be local or episodic. It is different from rumor in that it displays little in the way of staying power. Some celebrity gossip may become rumor in the long run.

Finally, the word *myth* is used quite distinctly by folklorists. Folklorists associate myths with explanatory narratives that are often self-consciously figurative, whereas colloquial usage, again, may use the word as a substitute for falsehood (Bennett and Smith, 1984). Social scientists may either endorse the folkloric usage or instead may tend toward the colloquial association by identifying widespread misconceptions or tightly gripped delusions as 'myths'.

Rumor's relationship to formal communication, to the binary of truth and falsity, and to the binary of skepticism and credulity appears to be dynamic. Forms of belief and disbelief toward word-of-mouth information, including rumor, may indeed be tied to changing information ecologies, and connected to cultural changes in the conceptualization of the authoritative and the factual in social life. In particular, the performance of rumor in the context of information overload and *hypersubjectivity* (Donovan, 2002, 2004) will be considered, using my own research on internet newsgroups and crime rumors.

Origins of the project

This critical history of rumor study stems from a previous and more specific project on contemporary urban legends about crime. Having initially studied rumor endorsement, discussion and debunking in internet newsgroup settings, and what I observed to be a quite distinctive role that crime rumor played in a world saturated with both real and fictional accounts of crime, I became interested in how rumor had been conceptualized in the past.

Immediately noticeable is that past research has paid scant attention to the social role of the skeptic or debunker as an active participant in the evolution of rumors. In my own study of crime legends on the internet, debunkers played an extremely vital role: obsessed with debunking rumors and legends as their intent, they also inadvertently helped promulgators and believers refine their ideas, reinterpret the contextual meaning of the stories they valued, and relaunch a more 'bulletproof' story. Debunkers and promulgators, in other words, help create one another, and the evolution of texts is often iterative.

Later in this paper it will be argued that certain theoretical difficulties, stemming

from what appeared to be empirical shifts in the character of rumors – their content, their practice as speech forms in informal settings, and their ability to be thematically characterized – probably also discouraged intensive scholarship after the late 1960s.

Most existing studies also operate with the assumption that gullibility or true situational ambiguity best explains the persistence of rumor. My own research suggests that many styles of belief exist that do not require gullibility, and that ambiguity can be created.

I. History

Origins of rumor research

From the beginning of social scientific interest in rumor, the study of it was fraught with a tension between a mechanical view of rumor as an inevitable product of message decay, on the one hand, and a psychoanalytic approach, on the other. Many studies of the former sort were concerned with proving that rumor acted as the children's game 'Whisper Down the Lane' or the parlor game 'Telephone' has always averred: that the process was linear, mundane and inevitable as information was passed along word-of-mouth lines. Distortion simply emerged as a cumulative outcome (Hösch-Ernst, 1915; Gorphe, 1927). But conceptually, what was shown? Did a piece of information 'whispered down a lane' really stand in well for a rumor in a natural setting? What about rumors that would eventually be verified as true: how was the correct information preserved so well in those cases if distortion was inevitable?

Psychoanalytically oriented researchers of rumor have found its role in the reduction of anxiety through the reshaping of information into acceptable forms (Rosnow and Fine, 1976: 62). This quality in part explains why word-of-mouth and informally circulated genres persist as sources of meaning in a world which not only has high levels of information input but also high diversity in the character of those inputs. Rumors and legends remain as practices in which the teller and the hearer have some creative role to play and direct; yet, as Von Roretz (1915: 28) observed early in the line of rumor research, the practitioners can at the same time avoid responsibility for what they are expressing by treating the information as factual news.

Rumor research in the 20th century

By the mid-20th century, greater attention was paid to regularities in the distortion of information in word-of-mouth settings. The desire to control rumors in North America during the Second World War resulted in a spate of rumor clinics and hence systematic research. Opinion leaders in government, media and civic organizations identified rumor as a possible source of morale erosion or even subversion (Rosnow and Fine, 1976: 26–7). Among those things thought to undermine the war effort was the classic 'loose lips' among those in military service or close to them. But the home front saw its own share of rumor, not only about the war itself, but about the

character of collective domestic sacrifice on its behalf. Allport and Lepkin's study (1945: 14) of rationing rumors alleging waste and special privilege concludes that, compared with the actual hardship imposed, the lack of access to accurate information was much more direct a cause of individual endorsement of such rumors: 'The more information he has, and the more carefully he thinks, the less chance that he will be led into believing by his inner, and often unrecognized, impulses.' Knapp (1944: 35–6) saw rumor as an outgrowth of social disorder, of which war was one type, while Allport and Postman (1947: 1) saw rumor as more quotidian, common to both war and peace, although interestingly, they draw all of their examples from crisis situations.

Knapp found that rumor was able to speak to hostile and divisive impulses which could not be easily articulated in other ways, perhaps for fear of approbation.² Allport and Postman identified three characteristics of rumor as it passed along informal routes of communication. First, information was 'leveled'. The tendency was for accounts to be shorter, more concise, and simpler. Second, certain retained details were 'sharpened'. Choice of retained details was likely to be selective. Finally, rumor material was 'assimilated', or adapted to pre-existing cognitive frameworks consistent with the views of study participants.

Shibutani (1966: 56–8, 62) employed Allport and Postman's basic principles in his case study of rumor among Japanese-Americans in internment camps in California during the war,³ but regarded the rumor process as a normal rather than pathological aspect of social life. It was understood as a problem-solving activity by groups of people who are deprived of adequate information; thus they produce 'improvised news' through a 'collective transaction'. The process was collaborative and in some ways functional. Peterson and Gist (1951), as well, saw 'snowballing' or creative elaboration, rather than leveling or sharpening, in the circulation of rumors. What differed among scholars of this era was really how much rumor behavior could be controlled and whether it was really desirable to do so (Klapp, 1972: 252–3).

Shibutani also criticized the psychological analysis of rumor – particularly the above variety that attributes rumor's lifeblood to low impulse-control or educational deficits – as tending to individualize it. For instance, both Knapp (1944: 35–6) and Allport and Postman (1947: 504) assume that while conditions that encourage rumor exist at a group level, the actual practice of it derives from individual subjective bias and 'rumor mongering' behavior. Researchers in the 20th century often followed the same path, linking transformation of rumor material to demographic and cognitive characteristics of individuals. This focus did little to explain why rumor has so frequently disobeyed these boundaries to produce a 'public' informal medium.⁴ Bordia and DiFonzo (2002) suggest that incorporation of rumor scholarship beyond North America might have averted this individualistic overemphasis.

The lasting legacy of wartime research

Allport and Postman (1947: 502–3) also offered a basic formula for the formation of rumor which became widely accepted in rumor studies: that both the *importance* of the issue and an *absence or ambiguity of information* must be present for a rumor to take

hold, and that the tenacity of a rumor is associated with such variables.⁵ After the war, interest in applied rumor research waned. The late 1960s, however, saw a small resurgence in interest in both rumor control and sociological interest in rumor's community contexts. Assumptions regarding the epistemology of rumor quietly unraveled.

Rosnow and Fine (1976) question the previous operationalization of the concept of ambiguity as one from which mass media or other 'official institution' reports are absent. Instead, the plentiful nature of news by the 1970s also meant that multiple perspectives had emerged about important events such as the Vietnam War, racial and gender relations, and economic crisis: 'In a society with a free and divided press, different sources may contradict one another, which must inevitably add to the confusion and increase feelings of anxiety and fear' (Rosnow and Fine, 1976: 116). Knopf (1975) also observed certain regularities in crisis-related rumor, but rather than focusing upon ambiguity or immediate events as an explanatory etiology, she focused upon the 'total existential context' of racial conflict and urban riots and associated rumors from 1967 to 1969.

[R]umor closes the gap between a hostile belief and its embodiment as 'fact' . . . Thus, rumors are not only a refinement and crystallization of hostile beliefs, but a realization of them, a confirmation by 'reality' – reality as perceived by the group of people involved. (p. 159)

Unlike previous research, Knopf tempers the importance of ambiguity with the underlying historical conflict: 'Take away the adversative aspects of an event and you take away much of its ambiguity' (p. 163). Thus, while the ongoing 'collective transaction' may be built upon ambiguity, this ambiguity in turn is inherently built upon existing conflict. Knopf's work is one of the first to suggest that ambiguity is less an objective condition than one that is, at least partially, imputed by actors already historically and socially situated.

Rosenthal's account (1973 [1970]) of rumor clinic work in Detroit during the same period underscores the notion that ambiguity is an active construction. Plenty of real events related to racial strife and rioting could have, theoretically, been used as grist for the rumor mill in both black and white neighborhoods, but the vast majority of calls to the rumor clinic related to the clinic's category of general fear rather than distortions of real incidents.

Post-authoritative rumors

The years 1969 to 1970 in particular were significant for several unrelated rumor cycles of enduring interest in what is now termed contemporary legend study. Two in particular – both peculiar but quite different from one another – are examined here for their broader significance in terms of the study of rumor. In Orléans, France, rumors of young women disappearing from dress boutiques provoked a reaction that seemed ready to escalate into violence directed at the town's mainly Jewish boutique owners. The rumor claimed that young women had been drugged, dis-

guised and sold abroad into sex slavery. After government and civic agencies embarked on an intense public debunking campaign; townspeople admitted to researchers that they continued to believe that 'where there's smoke, there's fire'.⁶ Morin (1970) who investigated this incident using a community-study approach describes it as an outburst of a regressive panic resulting from 'civic immaturity'. Thus we can regard this rumor cycle as *traditional* or *crowd-behavior* related in the sense that it was directly implicated in an incipient panic. It is also a conventional rumor in the sense that it is, in Knapp's words, a classic antisemitic 'wedge driver'.

Another rumor cycle of those years with lasting impact upon the analysis of rumor had not to do with crime at all. In the summer of 1969 a rumor began to circulate that Beatles member Paul McCartney had died in a car accident in 1966 and been replaced secretly by a 'look and sound alike' named William Campbell. Suczek (1972: 65) found that rather than conforming to Shibutani's collective problem-solving model, the polarization between believers and skeptics was vivid, but non-engaged: 'Rather than working dialectically to create explanations for new and ambiguous events . . . the publics in this instance seemed to withdrawal into fixed camps, facing each other as factional forces dedicated to the defense of separate positions.' Suczek went on to note that debunking of the rumor had no impact other than to fuel the part of the rumor which alleged a cover-up. Rather than information being absent, formal channels of communication were simply distrusted by 'publics increasingly inclined to turn to folk communicational resources' (p. 69). In sum, idle antagonism characterized the rumor. It was disconnected not only from panic and information-seeking, but also from a sense that pooled resources could arrive at an acceptable truth about the matter.

Morin's and Suczek's studies also shed light for the first time on the consequential role of skeptics and debunkers in the evolution of a rumor, finding that far from being squelched by widespread debunking activity, rumor simply regroups (as Morin put it 'goes underground') and then re-emerges as if it had never been dispensed with. Rumors are resilient and in many ways gain strength over the long term from debunkers and skeptics. Rosnow and Fine's (1976: 74-7) assessment of the McCartney rumor concurs with that of Suczek, in terms of its 'idly antagonistic' quality. They found no significant demographic or biographical differences between believers and skeptics. Rather they attribute the 'idle' character of the rumor to an expanding market for contemporary folklore of this sort. The baby boom created large numbers of people the right age to find the rumor important, and this interested public also had demonstrated skepticism about other official stories through popular protest. The McCartney rumor seemed to be a sort of new word-of-mouth form.

It supposedly reported bad news, yet very little grief and fear was felt; no orientation toward action was associated with the report. It had the makings of a budding legend or literary invention, rather than the news item it supposedly was. (Rosnow and Fine, 1976: 19)

More so than examples drawn from wartime, we can see in the case of the Paul-is-dead rumor the degree to which interlocutors are able to impute ambiguity where

there is very little. Even if we can look upon Morin's Orléans episode as an example of the re-emergence of the pre-modern legend, others such as the McCartney rumor were in some ways the first postmodern ones. Leading neither to panic, nor to truth-seeking, nor even information-enhancement, they became idle talk for disengaged speculation. A more precise term is probably *post-authoritative*.

Contemporary legend studies in the United States

A marked decline of interest in such research in the discipline of sociology is evident by the 1970s. While a few fascinating works about rumors and urban legends followed in the 1980s and 1990s, these studies were largely focused on content and the salience of particular kinds of content for specific audiences.

Turner (1993) studied legends that circulate primarily among African-Americans about white enmity toward blacks, specifically against the black body. She argues that there is a congruity between some of these factually false legends and some more realistic concerns of African-Americans based on the historical realities of racism, as well as on present-day internal ambivalence about black consumption patterns. The rumors also serve as a kind of incipient rejection of economic patterns that are perceived by more politicized members of the community as counter-productive. (Turner, 1993: 174–9) Racial oppression and racial conflict throughout American history are punctuated by rumor cycles among both blacks and whites alleging planned, incipient group violence, Turner notes (pp. 34–52), but for African-Americans 'the grapevine' has also provided improvised news set against distrusted sources dominated by white society.

Fine (1992) chose several legends which seemed to capture American cultural ambivalence about sex and money; seeing them as an expression of alienation with both dissenting and conservative features. Licentiousness and consumer pleasure is at once enjoyed and guiltily repudiated. One fast-food legend, 'The Kentucky Fried Rat', is a cluster of stories about accidentally fried rodents ending up in buckets of take-out chicken. The legend simultaneously expresses distrust of corporations and discomfort with changing mores.⁷

The increased emphasis in American life on leisure and the changing roles of women make the fast food restaurant possible, and possibly necessary. Yet, these changes in value orientation did not occur without psychological effects, as individuals in transition have not completely reconciled themselves to the structural changes these new values imply. (Fine, 1992: 133)

Such legends about corporations can affect their economic performance. Koenig (1985) is specifically concerned with the application of rumor studies to the combat of corporate-related rumors. Koenig's study also emphasizes salience anchored in reality; that 'a primary requirement for rumor survival is that the message be relevant to the people involved' (Koenig, 1985: 20). Significant business damage is the norm in such cases. Rumors resurface even after having been thoroughly debunked, and the consumer behavior of weak believers or even non-believers can nonetheless

be affected. In sum, these more recent approaches normalize rumor rather than attach it solely to crisis. Content is the primary focus, rather than genre.

Some notable exceptions are: the work of Bordia (1996) who examined the evolution of one rumor cycle in an internet newsgroup and examined the group's development based upon a content analysis of interpretive statements over time; and the experimental approach of Heath, Bell and Sternberg (2001) who tested the hypothesis that serial promulgation of urban legends depends upon 'emotional selection' of more 'disgusting' elements or motifs.⁸ These studies may mark the beginning of a return to the more basic study of rumors.

Modern folklorists take notice

While generalist work on the rumor declined in the 1970s and 1980s, the discipline of folklore demonstrated a new-found interest in the subgenre 'contemporary legend' at this time.⁹ Dundes (1980) and others have argued that in the past folklorists were overly preoccupied with genre and structural relations between symbolic elements in folk texts, rather than social and cultural meaning, thus removing 'the folk from folklore'. Criticizing a lack of disciplinary development in folklore studies, Dégh (1994: 1–11) cites mass communication, rapid technological shifts, population mobility, and cultural diversity and hybridization as the new relevant context for contemporary folklore studies. She criticizes certain earlier purely preservationist approaches which feared folklore would be supplanted by the onslaught of mass media as limited and static, suggesting instead that the folk speech and practice of the present is a part of the meaning of the folklore, and not a demeaning of it.¹⁰ Campion-Vincent (1990, 1997) began to incorporate media images of folklore forms as well.

It seems that where rumor left off, 'urban legends' emerged. Brunvand (1981, 1984, 1999) has collected urban legends for longer than 20 years and has published several popular-audience books, with an emphasis on those legends circulating in the United States. Coursing through his collected tales of pets bursting in microwave ovens, celebrities rescued by hospital personnel from their bizarre sexual excesses, castration tales, and food-contamination stories was Brunvand's observed unitary theme: these stories reflected anxiety about our transition to a fully modern life – urban legend in the sense of urbanized and urbane. In this theme Brunvand sees subterranean regret about the loss of *Gemeinschaft* charm and social familiarity, even for those who perhaps never encountered it.

Social scientists who do study urban legends select case studies by choosing a theme in advance related to the author's broader interests. This is a practical decision based upon the fact that hundreds if not thousands of legends circulate in the United States alone at any given time.¹¹

However, some neglected generalist ideas from older research should be brought forward. First, there is the emphasis on rumor as a genre that fills a *specific* informational niche – dynamic and historically variable. There is also a neglected area of how people believe things and not just what they believe. There is also increased need to examine what we mean by 'ambiguity' in the fueling of rumor. And finally, there is

the dialogic, iterative nature of the rumor which is produced both by promulgation and by debunking in tandem; whether the process is consensual (as Shibutani suggested) or conflictual (as Rosnow and Fine averred). This is deeply relevant whether the setting is micro (local or small group, such as the internet newsgroup) or macro (broad-based and mass, such as particular long-standing crime legends). In this paper's final sections, I attempt to contribute to these areas based on my own research on crime rumors.¹²

II. What does rumor do?

Rumor is dialogic: both believers and skeptics build rumor

Shibutani, Rosnow and Fine, Morin, and Suczek's works all raise the issue of the vital social role played by skeptics. Skeptics do not simply act as a quantifiable countervailing force upon the credulous, though that may be their *desired* social role and intent. Instead, they act as barriers around which rumor must travel. Yet in the process, the rumor adapts. An example: when scholars examined the Paul-is-dead rumor, they found that skeptics merely *asserted* their disbelief or displeasure with the rumor in much the same way that believers endorsed it. The skeptics may only have prevailed because McCartney did; had he retreated into private life such an outcome would be less certain.¹³

Themes common to rumor, in other words, involve the digging in of heels rather than an active construction or critique. The process is not always about conscious making of social claims. Kapferer (1990) also takes up the issue of rumor-content denial and its effect on the career of the rumor. Here the flexible nature of rumor, in the face of denial, is emphasized. Implausible details are replaced with plausible ones and the story can then be believed. Denials of certain types can be absorbed.

The person who spreads the rumor generally does not try to stick to the precise message he has heard, but rather to persuade his public, and is willing to correct or improve the message in order to do so . . . It is because rumors are supple and malleable throughout their construction that they are so at ease when faced with objection bearing on details. (Kapferer, 1990: 244)

Rumor, then, is not defeated by factual objection itself. Kapferer emphasizes rumor's independence from conscious social reality (Kapferer, 1990: 4, 263). This 'official reality' is represented sometimes by debunkers and thus rumor debunking may have little satisfaction in the long run. Yet Kapferer defines rumor not by its falsehood, but primarily by its word-of-mouth character and its essential resistance-to-modernity meta-theme.

Even before knowing the exact answers, rumors try to reject innovation the intruder, foreigner, or symbol of changing habits. Rumors are one of the defense mechanisms by which certain citizens try to preserve their old habits. They proffer up 'facts' that justify resistance to change and, more generally speaking, to our society governed by science and technology. (Kapferer, 1990: 125)

Crime rumors, in my view, also speak to a sense of deep suspicion that one is alone in the world with predators. Mass society thematically – not directly – is taken to task for abandoning the social contract.

An illustration: the 'attempted abduction'

A particular shopping mall-abduction rumor, a tale descendant from the Orléans episode, which has its origins in the 19th century, currently circulates as a child-capture rumor. Katherine Samon's 1993 article on urban legends in the popular women's magazine, *McCall's*, featured the one of the more common versions.

A good friend of mine told me this, and it still gives me chills. A young mother and her four-year-old daughter were shopping, and while the mother was busy trying on clothes, the little girl disappeared. The frantic woman called security guards, who combed the mall for the missing child. They were about to give up when one of the guards found the girl standing on a toilet in the men's restroom so you couldn't see her feet. Her long, dark hair had been chopped off and dyed blond, and she was dressed in boy's clothes! Apparently she had been abducted by a notorious child-snatching ring who abandoned her once they realized the search was on.

Gotcha!

There's no truth to this story. It's just one example of what is known as an urban legend. (Samon, 1993: 120)

Brunvand terms this legend 'The Attempted Abduction' and notes that while it was routinely debunked in local newspapers during the 1970s, it has maintained its basic narrative structure (1984: 79–82; 1999: 316–17). In the 1970s versions, girls were captured from shopping malls, it was alleged in the American instance, for procurement into local prostitution rackets (Brunvand, 1984: 80–1). In some versions, both old and new, it is also maintained that other bystanders did nothing to intervene in the kidnapping because they believed the captors when they explained that the hysterical or unconscious victim was their relative who had fallen ill in the restroom. The bystander is thus exonerated from complicity by the shrewdness and complexity of the capture scheme, and simultaneously admonished for a lack of hypervigilance.

The rumor or legend has its origins in the 'white slavery' moral panics, which peaked in the 1880s in Britain and the 1910s in the United States. These early versions allege the forced abduction of women from candy stores for the purposes of forced prostitution. While the legend has been challenged and debunked nearly from the beginning (Billington-Grieg, 1913; Massachusetts, 1914), and as a result 'driven underground' from time to time, it has never totally dissipated.

One version is the pizza commercial scam – in which women are lured into abductors' vans by the prospect of appearing in a television commercial if they try a new pizza. Discussion of the pizza commercial scam story found its way into a news-group, was promptly debunked as a hoax, and then defended by the promulgator, Val. Champions of the story asserted the moral primacy of even a false warning which might help prevent a future abduction, over skepticism, which merely concerned itself with 'fact' or 'event', and not the expansive threats of 'possibility'.

Lon from the folklore group has challenged the pizza scam story. Val, incensed, responded:

As for what I posted, I thought that some might find this information valuable. Why would you have a problem with reminding women that there are predators out there, and that some of them can be very creative, is something that makes no sense to me. (5/12/99)

Viv, another skeptic, engages with Val and others in a general polemic about excessive worry about stranger crime. Yet it is encounters with debunkers that often provoke more elaborate versions of abduction tales to emerge. For instance, debunkers will often ask why a supposed kidnapping incident was not reported in the news media. Generally, crime rumors are passed on without benefit of such an explanation. It is really such challenges that come from debunkers that create, for instance, a conspiratorial explanation – where mall management or Disney has paid off everyone to keep the story quiet. This particular rumor, having such longevity, is one of the best examples of how interlocutory processes between believers and skeptics, in this case for more than 100 years, together in an iterative fashion create stalwart legends.

Do rumors 'fix' general anxieties?

If we accept the basic observation of Allport and Postman that anxiety may be reduced by leveling and sharpening of rumor content, which simplify problems and thus, by implication, solutions, and Von Roretz's early observation that the rumor form enables the distancing of the expressor from the intentions of the expression, by presenting the information as 'fact' or 'news' then it is easier to see the cathartic quality of the practice of rumor apart from its particular content.

Best and Horiuchi (1985) studied legends about tainted Halloween treats because they were interested in the growth in public claims-making about threats to children and their social construction. Best (1990) also argues that urban legends concerning harm to children are a part of an intensified public focus upon threats to children beginning in the late 1970s. The authors describe 'Halloween sadism' as a persistent legend which enabled parents to take individualized action (candy inspection) rather than act collectively for social reform as other, better-organized, claims-making activities would require.

It works fairly well to place Halloween sadism within the context of the 'fixing' theory. In this way, a variety of threats to the safety of children can be concentrated into a threat that enables parental control and intervention. The greatest threat by far to children on holidays or any other day may be automobiles; it would, however be difficult to acknowledge and subsequently act upon this threat without substantial changes in the American (particularly suburban) lifestyle. Returning to the mall-abduction legends, I will examine the contemporary version from a 'fixing' perspective.

Rumor as fixing process: 'the attempted abduction'

Most current versions of the child-napping tale involve the foiling of the plot by an observant mother who recognizes her child's shoes. Fathers tend to be altogether absent; neither rescuer nor distracted parent. Still other versions suggest that security personnel are so used to this sort of kidnapping occurring that they instruct the mother to scan the exiting crowd for her child's shoes. In either case the implication is that little safety is provided by numbers. Another current version involves similar abductions from Disney theme parks. Despite the fact that in reality it is fairly easy to lose a child in a theme park, no such incidents have been reported to Orlando or Anaheim police (Miller, 1994; Smith, 2000). This means either that no such abductions have taken place there or that a massive conspiracy cover-up campaign exists involving parents, media, the Walt Disney Corporation and the local police departments. Here is a query from a park fan on the internet newsgroup *alt.disney.disneyland*:

*Has anyone heard about the kidnapping that almost took place at DL [Disneyland]? Apparently a woman and her child (either age 4, 5, or 6) were sitting on the curb on main street, the mother turned her head just for a second and looked back for her child and he was gone. She then frantically alerted [sic] security. They took her to an office where there were quite a few t.v. monitors to look for her son. She was so out of breath and distraut [sic] security told her that they didn't have much time, that to look closely at faces not at the clothes her child was wearing or his hair. From the time she entered the office, they found her child in a matter of 3 minutes. He was headed out the entrance by a couple of Iranians. When they grabbed him they took him to a restroom and changed his clothes and shaved his head, all in a matter of minutes. That way he wouldn't be noticed. There [sic] reason for taking him was so that they could sell him.

This just sends chills up my spine. I have 3 children 7, 4, 2. The moral of this sad story is that when ever you are in the park keep your child at your side at all times, to prevent this ever happening to you.

A Truly Crazy Disney Fan! – Kim (9/22/96)

The *Urban Legends Reference Pages* summarizes versions of the Disneyland kidnap story by noting that they are often accompanied by dour forecasts of the victims being sold into sex slavery.¹⁴ Yet the fact that these modern versions, involving children, often fail to specify an ultimate nefarious purpose for the elaborate abduction, opens up a great deal of leeway to the creative hearer and reteller. Here, weaker (in the sense of less organized) forms of belief may actually be the strongest suit in maintaining the salience of the legend today. One may believe the abduction story without believing that a kidnapping and prostitution ring was operating; perhaps, to fill in the blanks, one might imagine black-market adoption or sexual abuse at the hands of the perpetrator himself. This version includes the claim that 'Iranians' were responsible, expressing not just common xenophobia, but also that an idealized place like Disneyland may not be impervious to geopolitical intrusion.

The various abduction versions share the idea that formal protectors can do little but warn women and parents to be hypervigilant. In the past, such legends were attached to either mob behavior, racial suspicion or organized moral panics. The con-

nection now, between the modern abduction legends and collective behavior, is much more tenuous. And as with previously discussed examples, the story picks up no details related to the few, but real, child-abductions that are widely publicized – even well-known abductions that have taken place in shopping areas.¹⁵ If the supposed capture of women off the street or out of stores could provoke quasi-mob behavior in the past (and it did), why does nothing but e-mail come of such heinous rumors now? It seems that here as with other modern crime legends, expectations of redress are low or non-existent.

Unlike Morin's Orléans, this 'panic' is highly internal and individualized. A specific set of abduction practices can be guarded against, suggest the warnings. The guardedness is made as specific to one's own child as possible (make sure you know their clothes and shoes each day) rather than to the generalized safety of children in general. Skepticism about specific claims of evil doings are associated with 'not caring at all' (as one mom put it), or with naiveté and foolhardiness or, worse yet, with insensitivity in a world where every subjective claim is equally valid. To challenge the claims of a trusted source ('sent to me by a friend of a friend') is to create a situation of insult; a challenge of a person's 'right' to their beliefs, and also a rebuffing of help, in the view of the promulgator.

Individual responses and lack of recourse

These and similar warning-stories indicate that eradication is not a possibility. For the rumors' partisans, there are no police or law enforcement agencies that can challenge the harm directly. Most often, police do not appear at all in these tales. Even when they do, their role is only to warn people that these practices are occurring. No investigation will be launched and no arrest can be made. Yet it is only in some rare cases that police, courts or business elites have been overtly believed complicit in covering up incidents. Most interlocutors I observed did not rely upon an elaborated conspiratorial framework. Rather, a sense of collective guardianship was absent.

Promulgators, I believe, genuinely offer their tales as warnings to others: a gesture of protectiveness and abstract solidarity; a pro-social act in a post-social world (Donovan, 2004). Non-obvious knowledge about self-protection is offered to others freely. While the tales certainly fulfill the conventional role of 'cautionary tales' about dangers in the modern world, the sorts of advice implicit in the crime legend are always idiosyncratic and peculiar. Fear is thus managed through specific, and often arcane, rituals of protection rather than reversion to traditional, and very generalized, protective practices. When the crime rumor is understood as a *practice*, it can be seen to mediate between the solipsism of individualistic crime prevention and social solidarity through warning.

III. Forms of credulity and skepticism

Crime legends believed and questioned in internet newsgroups

Belief and disbelief in rumors are not uniform typologies, but neither do they exist as a continuum. Believers and skeptics are in fact readily distinguished in *in situ* conversations about rumors. Both are constrained by a loss of cultural authority that characterizes the current scene. This situation is further complicated by different styles of belief and skepticism. For believers of crime rumors, generally, the world is devoid of accountable authorities and responsible bystanders, replete with universal distrust of one's neighbor and a striking sense of hopelessness to be heard about one's fears. The world evoked by participants is atavistic, anarchic and Hobbesian. It is also one where information of an authoritative nature about one's society cannot necessarily be expected.

Debunkers, however, also voice fear: of a world in which real and hoax threats cannot be sorted out, where truth is what partisans attempt to make it, where media sources become so distrusted as to be useless, and where the rise of 'the rule of the mob' is always anticipated. A loss of authority is perceived to be at work: not a protective one but the one that holds fast to a notion that true and false may still reasonably be sorted out.

Contrasting believers and debunkers, I find that different sorts of sources of information are distrusted. Yet since all participants enter the conversation, the negotiation of truth and distrust of most conventional sources of information about crime (for instance, local print media) are common denominators and 'working principles' under which the veracity of sources are debated. Debunkers generally were more interested in the facts or lack of facts behind a given story than were believers. Believers generally emphasized the value of the story as a warning tale regardless of its basis in fact.

People who warn others about threats are performing what they believe to be a helpful act. This act may take the form of a specific warning, or a testimony about how depraved the modern world can be. In either case the desire is largely to pass along information which conveys an alternative 'true' reality, as Kapferer suggested, rather than to maliciously spread scary stories or to speak figuratively. The tendency for people online to forward such legends and warnings to friends, relatives and co-workers goes beyond the mere technological ease of the action. Before the internet, and still now, there have been those who duplicated, distributed and posted paper flyers warning of threats: from gang initiation rituals, LSD-laced children's stickers, and Satanic-run corporations.

Below I hope to distinguish several ways in which people believe and disbelieve in an epistemologically contested environment. By such an environment I mean both the local one of the internet newsgroup and the broad one of cultural influences. Early research reminds us that rumors are, on the whole, interpretive activity that aims to consolidate events or disparate parcels of information. What more contemporary research suggests is that 'rumor-mongering' in the fervent sense may play less of a role than previously suggested. In my own research, the vast majority of investment in rumor was instrumental, defying the conventional assumption

(Allport and Postman, 1947; Knapp, 1944) that so-called rumor-mongers can be easily identified and isolated. Most believers I encountered were not 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1963) in the traditional sense. Most, instead, believed the rumor in question because they found it useful to do so.

Instrumentality in belief

These are some of the common ways in which the interlocutors I studied approached the rumors they heard: the use of *expansive definition* which allowed more well-defined events – though, interestingly, not events that were *too* thematically proximate – to act as 'evidence' for the truth of the rumor's claims; *protective uncertainty*, or emphasis on the importance of not knowing; *inferential belief*, such as the inference that stories are likely to be true given the capacity for evil; and *symbolic truth and curative belief*, where a story is believed because such belief is thought to be 'realistic'. I have grouped these approaches under the general category 'instrumental' to highlight their performative characteristics.

Where the truth status of such a text is contested, as it often is in newsgroup settings, believers focus upon the salience of the content of the tale. That is, the moral or the message is held to be important regardless of the story's truth. When examining urban legend *texts* in isolation, one may lose sight of the apparent fact that a synergy between styles of belief exists, sustaining the fertile ground for the reappearance of tales repeatedly debunked. Fervent belief (such as that of moral entrepreneurs) may be the least powerful part of the explanation. The vitality of urban legends probably depends more upon believers who are 'taken' with, rather than stubbornly 'mistaken' about, the crime legend.

Expansive definition and inferential belief

The use of *expansive definition* takes place when a debate about the factual quality of a given story prompts supporters to bring in examples of events or practices that do exist, which share some superficial themes with elements of the legend, to lend support to the original story; or where a problem once defined as such pulls more and more objects into its fold.

In the case of the abduction legends, prostitution rings for which women and children are captured can be transformed into rings of pedophiles without fundamentally altering the narrative in which abductees are disguised and drugged in order to be kidnapped right under the noses of their parents or companions. The abduction legend retains its narrative integrity by simply replacing one set of villains for another, or by allowing the motivations for the captors to remain open-ended or a matter of speculation for tellers and hearers. Several scenarios may be developed and held at once by different interlocutors. Yet far from diluting the tale into an admixed set of real and fictional events, the *cognate* version tends to be reinforced rather than eroded.¹⁶

Inferential belief is somewhat different. Since children are actually abducted by

strangers sometimes, confronted believers who become rumor-defenders ask, why couldn't this particular scenario happen? The inferential believer does not fully rely upon his or her own knowledge to lend support to the likelihood of a story being true, rather, he or she relies on a grey area of events for which they assert no evidence exists. Inferential belief is characterized by a commitment to an open-ended social reality which is thought to be ultimately unknowable, but affords some grounding in more verifiable truths. Inference from existing conditions provides the support: if people are cruel and will do anything for money or gratification, then any supposed event containing such actors and victims may be occurring. Thus the main motivator keeping the story at play is its *possibility*.

Symbolic belief and curative belief

These two styles of belief, *curative belief* being a special case of *symbolic belief*, are instrumental in the sense that the *value* of the story in explaining the world is made logically distinct from its truth status in real or similar events. In traditional folklore we colloquially say that there is 'a moral to a story' or a lesson to be learned. Symbolic believers use this approach when challenged on the factual elements of the story. (This is a different epistemological stance than that of the inferential believer. Here, the difference between what is known and what can be known is granted, but the truth status of the story is demoted in relative overall *importance*. In contrast, inferential belief weights the possible truth of the story quite heavily.)

This symbolic belief, alleging a greater truth or realism amid possible falsehoods, may or may not be accompanied by the idea (a 'curative' element) that passing along such a story is valuable in its own right regardless of truth status. (Where curative elements are absent, symbolic belief simply means that the person considering the legend finds the story consistent with his or her ideas about how the world operates.) It bears reiterating that believers are less invested in a tale's veracity than debunkers are about its falsehood. The underlying message about danger in the world is taken to heart by believers, and while the specific narrative passed along or believed is important to them, its truth status is of little importance compared with its metaphoric illustration of a perceived real set of conditions.

In curative belief, specifically, the primacy of the lesson learned is taken a step further. Where curative belief is present, the solidarity-promoting qualities of the crime legend are more prominent. The end justifies the means: perhaps this exact thing never happened, but similar things could, and the tale is being passed along with the hearer's safety in mind. The moms and shoppers who passed along warnings about theme park and mall abductions quite emphatically stated that the alternative to not heeding the accompanying warnings was to 'not care at all'. Further, they often state that any approbation in response will be 'worth it' if the warning caused people to be more cautious. Thus skepticism about the specific tale is linked to a foolhardy obliviousness of danger in general.

The idea that a crime legend's message is valuable and represents a greater truth regardless of how well it reflects actual events was surprisingly prominent and confidently asserted among believers. Debunkers, too, also often concede the basic

accuracy of the brutality of the world for women, children and other victims before attempting to debunk these legends. This means that claims to symbolic truth are often strong in the face of factual debunking. Thus for symbolic or curative believers, there is not so much a cognitive dissatisfaction with the empirical claims of debunkers but an affective or expressive one. Debunkers are often at a disadvantage as they rarely venture beyond technical dissent into the symbolic.

Protective uncertainty, or the importance of not knowing

This practice occurs where believers insist that neither they, nor anyone else, have the ability to know whether certain claims are true or false. Finding out is specifically guarded against. 'Who knows how many kids have been taken this way? . . .' The clear function of this constructed non-clarity, whether intentional or not, is to protect the area of scrutiny from would-be skeptics. It is not as if such areas are literally without recourse to empirical investigation. Some of this anti-scrutiny results from a suspicion of expertise, especially about crime and safety. Thus, there is some resistance to being told that a scary and depraved practice, such as a stolen-organ resale ring or the disguise-abduction ring probably does not exist, especially when being told this by self-appointed experts at the urban legend debunking sites. The use of protective uncertainty *actively* maintains an atmosphere of ambiguity that helps preserve the 'lesson' or fearful meaning for the believer.

Not knowing is an intrinsic part of the appeal and spread of rumor (Donovan, 2004). It is a part of believing, not a counterweight to it. By declaring some things simply unknowable, the casual believer makes room for the crime legend of any specific sort to be true. If no-one's knowledge can be greater than anyone else's, then the possibility that a story is true is just as likely as that it is false. Debunkers are rarely accused of falling for a cover-up on the part of the police, the media or the Disney Corporation, but their ability to build a convincing wall of skepticism through an accumulation of negative evidence about a given tale is often challenged by believers epistemologically.

'Scorched earth' skepticism: a special case of protective uncertainty

Debunking seems to enhance ambiguity for casual believers. If something that one has heard from what one considers a reliable source is being challenged in its truthfulness, and there is thought to be no greater authority of reference in such matters, then what can one believe? A kind of evaluative leveling sets in, where former believers become the most aggressive and ambitious of debunkers – challenging even well-documented events. Whereas once everything was possible, now nothing is. In one episode that I observed in the group *alt.folklore.urban*, the group spent days analyzing some member's attempt to debunk a real fatal attack on a child in Southern California – one that had been covered extensively in the media (Donovan, 2004: 124–7).

This transformation is well illustrated in the 1999 horror film *Urban Legend*. In it,

a folklore class is convened and a fateful section of it is devoted to contemporary legends. Sensitized now to the duty to disbelieve, the students are then unable to evaluate any claims whatsoever about any crimes on campus, past or present. Skepticism turns into what I've termed 'scorched earth skepticism' (Donovan, 2004: 141–2) where the very basis of evaluation has been undermined by the professor's debunking. In the movie, the several crimes and a mass murder that happened on the fictional campus 25 years earlier are viewed with the same suspicion as that of the 'pop rocks combined with a carbonated drink will make you explode' legend trotted out in the lecture hall. What the presence of skepticism seems to do is to make the characters unable to sort out real and hoax threats. Since this is a horror film, there is always a moral, and ultimately it is that the skeptical mindset does everyone in.

This sort of extreme cynicism is actually a pretext for arbitrary belief, as Arendt (1973: 382) suggests. If nothing may be believed, then anything may. Kaminer (1992: 156) takes this to mean that the relative importance of one's belief preferences are enhanced in such settings; that there is less inhibition to simply believe what one wishes to believe, if there is no evaluation of evidence to take place. The stated goal of debunking communities, to sort truth from fiction, is thus seen by believers as the folly and hubris of those who trust in their own information sorting abilities.

IV. Ambiguity as an active construction

Is ambiguity an objective condition?

Discovering instrumental belief in rumor belief has drawn me to the idea that ambiguity is less often an objective condition that spawns rumor but an active construction. Suczek and Rosnow and Fine suggest that the observed tendency of rumor believers (and in some instances, debunkers) to resist information-seeking needs to be understood in the dramatically changed ecology of information. There is a basic problem with the notion of objective ambiguity spawning rumor in everyday situations: is there ever a true absence of 'news' in our world?

Information overload

'I see people developing a more blasé attitude toward the unthinkable as our information overload increases', Barbara Mikkelson, the co-moderator of the *Urban Legends-listserv* and *The Urban Legends Reference Pages*, told a *Seattle Times* reporter when asked why people seem not to be shocked by outlandish stories (Lacitis, 1999). That is, the ability of individuals to decide based upon content or source what is likely true, false or exaggerated is also conditioned by the amount of other information that they must process and glean for pertinent knowledge.

Shenk (1997: 30) suggests that in our increasingly 'message-dense' societies, a deep fragmentation is the necessary result when ordinary cognitive-sorting mechanisms become overloaded. As an easy strategy to manage such inputs, people now

seek out information communities which are 'self-reinforcing'. Shenk notes that 'the Net encourages a cultural splitting that can render physical communities much less relevant and free people from having to climb outside their own biases, assumptions, inherited ways of thought' (p. 125). In the modern world, these sets of thought parameters are chosen and constructed amid overwhelming options, and the authority and discipline of outside knowledge is increasingly discarded.

Crime legends, being authorless and arriving often as friendly warnings, create ambiguity and fear. The underlying message or moral developed by the believer is one that favors a view of danger in the world operating in ways that are not accessible to ordinary information-seekers.

Conclusion

Crime rumor and legends thrive in an age of post-certainty, although in another fashion so does the debunking of such legends. There is an element of information overload theory that sees belief in urban legends as a kind of happenstance mistake of cognitive overload; echoes of the earliest experiments in rumor study are heard. For Barbara Mikkelson and other high-profile debunkers to adopt this explanation is kind. Internet newsgroup participants often relied upon a highly subjective sense of truth and a series of imputed and affirmative unknowns aiming to destabilize the perceived certitude of others, often debunkers. The practice of crime rumors has aggressive as well as solidaristic qualities.

What makes the crime legend comfortable in this broad cultural setting is its liminal status between myth and news; its confusion of boundaries between figurative and literal truth. To gain a life lesson from a parable story is no longer enough. Lacking supernatural elements, the story must also be 'true' or 'real' in order to reveal. Thus both modern empiricism and postmodern subjectivism are employed at the same time.

The crime rumor has distinctive qualities. Its authorlessness seems to enhance its credibility precisely through its unverifiability. It enjoys a liminal status between cautionary tale or parable on the one hand, and real-world 'true crime' on the other. Mass media treatments of crime, by contrast, are also inextricably bound up with an official version of events, many of which provide a conclusion, while the crime legend seems to offer several options of interpretation of what's going on out there. Here, Shibutani's understanding of the rumor as a collective transaction and a problem-solving activity is most vivid. But the role of rumor is specific to our circumstances, too – and the production of ambiguity where there is very little may be one of its adaptations.

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Notes

1. Anecdotally, I also on several occasions found my students, who were familiar with the concept of 'the urban legend' more skeptically minded than my peers about widely circulated (and already debunked) rumor-legend texts.
2. Knapp's analysis (p. 25) suggested divisive rumors were the most common. But this predominance is not a necessary feature of civil strife or war. Nkpa's study (1975) of rumor during the Nigerian civil war, 1967–70, by contrast, shows the dominance of 'pipe dream' rumor and relatively low levels of 'wedge-driving' ones.
3. Drawn not only from his own experience, but also set in comparison to other rumor panics, Shibutani's work was published long enough after the heyday of rumor research to create a critical perspective on the 'critical deficit' model that had emerged.
4. However, some work has been done suggesting that anxiety levels may influence individuals' propensity to promulgate rumor. See Anthony (1973), Jaeger, Anthony and Rosnow (1980) and a meta-analysis by Rosnow (1991). Pendleton (1998) considers the literature on propensity to believe.
5. Chorus added that critical sensibility did not necessarily stop a rumor; rather the rumor was more likely to increase in *accuracy* as it passed through skeptical ears and was subject to the sharpening that stems from verification.
6. This same metaphor, alluding to the residue of widespread debunking, also appears in passing in Jacobson's (1948: 3–5) popular-audience book on rumor.
7. Fine (1992: 159) notes that distrust of big business expressed in these legends cannot be confused with 'the solidification of class consciousness, but only express a fleeting disrespect, which many informants claim not "really" to believe'.
8. The authors treat urban legends as a form of 'meme' based on the concept advanced by Dawkins (1976) that ideas are subject to competition and natural selection, with the caveat that there is no natural superior strength of truth.
9. Ellis (1990: 230) defines the contemporary legend as a story that is presented as news, deals with a perceived problem that needs attention, and attempts to regain control over an ambiguous situation. Also, it is noteworthy that Kapferer (1990) continues to use the term 'rumor' for what would equivalently be termed an urban or contemporary legend in English-language literature. This, and the citations that he uses, reflect continuity between rumor and legend research in France. Kapferer (1989: 470) was also able to add questions designed to measure the prevalence of certain health-related rumors to Gallup's 'standard omnibus polls' through the *Institut Français d'Opinion Publique*. To my knowledge this is the only recent incidence of national survey techniques employed in the research of rumor.
10. These fears appeared outside folklore as well; see Benedict (1931) and Taylor (1959).
11. See <<http://www.snopes.com>> for *The Urban Legends Reference Pages* and a list of links to other pages concerned with urban legends.
12. For details about the methodology used, see Donovan (2001, 2004).
13. As with other rumors that attach themselves to real events or persons, the Paul-is-dead rumor retains a strange autonomy, resisting confabulation with new or real developments, such as the murder of fellow Beatle John Lennon in 1980. This autonomy of the legend, once formed, is consistent with Kapferer's conceptualization of rumor as a parallel discursive reality.
14. <http://www.snopes.com/horrors/parental/kidnap.htm>
15. Of course, such kidnappings are publicized precisely because they are rare.
16. 'Cognate' version is a term lifted from folklore, referring to the core narrative that has staying power over time and in some cases across cultures.

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