

Rumors That Changed the World: A History of Violence and Discrimination

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Argument

All mankind held its breath when, in 1954, the *H-Bomb* – the hydrogen bomb, a weapon even more devastating than its ‘cousins’, which had destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki – officially became part of the military arsenal. But for millennia mankind has seemingly ignored the existence of a ‘bomb’ that has more often than not proven to be even more destructive: the *R-Bomb*, or *Rumor Bomb*.

Usually defined as *an unverified account that circulates from one person to another and refers to an object, event, or matter of public interest*, rumor and its importance in shaping history have been ignored for centuries by scholars and authors. But the effects of rumors have often proven to be more lasting than those of war.

In Antiquity, the Romans and Greeks believed that the gates of Hell were to be found on Cape Tenara, and Europeans of the Middle Ages were convinced that the entrance to the underworld was via the yawning crater of Mount Etna in Sicily. When the first travelers returned from the New World, they tried to convince their contemporaries that the natives they had seen

there had eyes in their chests or walked around holding their heads under their arms. It was believed that the Huns were a hybrid of humans and wolves, and scholars of the time were convinced that musical or mathematical talent was proof of demonic possession. All these *delirious beliefs*, as any psychologist of today would classify them if a patient lying on the couch of his consulting room were to express such views, were due to rumors. Rumors were capable of toppling dynasties, of sending leading figures to the scaffold, of causing terrible wars, of provoking massacres.

Prisoners of a minuscule geography, which could be reduced to their own small settlement and a radius of a few miles around it, people did not distinguish between *rumor* and *information*. Recent research has revealed that our brains are not designed to make so clear a distinction, using the same cerebral region for the cognitive integration of both.

Everything that lay outside the few thousand square miles that made up the ‘known world’ during Antiquity and the Middle Ages was *the beyond*, a mysterious region where anything was possible. As soon as we started to fill in these blanks on the world map and literary and communications developed to the point that they allowed wider access to *information*, i.e. from the twentieth century onwards, other planets became the new regions of mystery (see, for example, the pioneers of science fiction at the turn of the century), together with the still unexplored depths of the oceans.

In the Middle Ages, however, news traveled from one community to another via the few people who, from pleasure or necessity, dared to risk their lives on the perilous roads of the time. Viewed as *fools* for their courage and recklessness – in the Tarot deck the *Fool* (Le Mat) is depicted as a wayfarer with a pouch tied to a staff – were welcomed in small rural and urban communities precisely because they brought news: they were the ‘mass media’ of the day.

It was unimportant whether what they recounted was true or not, because anyway it was impossible to check the information. More important was the narrative of the story, its capacity to stir the imagination or to amuse.

When the German Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa died in the Crusade – it seems that he suffered a fatal stroke when he bathed in cold water on a torrid day – those returning home from the wars told the tale that the great warrior was sleeping in a cave and that he would awake when the thousand-year Reich was founded in the German lands (a slogan adopted by Hitler's propaganda in the 1930s). Why wouldn't such a story sound more seductive than a dry coroner's report published in a one-hundred-per-cent factual newspaper? St. Augustine records that around the year 400 it was still believed that the Roman Emperor Nero, dead for three and a half centuries at the time, was still alive and would return to the throne of his ancestors to restore the imperial glory of the past.

For reasons that still puzzle scientists, the human psychical world still includes what is known as *magical thinking*, and this type of thought is the perfect ecosystem in which rumours can evolve and multiply. Without magical thinking, works of fiction wouldn't keep us on the edge of our seats and we wouldn't laugh and cry in front of the cinema screen, certain in the knowledge that what we were seeing or reading was nothing more than the product of somebody's imagination and had no connection with reality.

If you think that such a situation was specific only to past times, when small communities were isolated and lack of communications facilitated the spread of outlandish rumors, and that nothing of the kind happens any more nowadays, I would urge you to think again. According to the opinion polls, more than a third of the American public believe in the existence of extra-terrestrials, for example, and that they visit the Earth constantly. Around the year 1500, when the

Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of the Witches) was published, a similar percentage of people probably strongly believed that naked women flew around on broomsticks and took part in black masses.

German scientist Wilhelm Stern (who invented the concept of IQ) designed an experiment in 1902 that aimed to ‘dissect’ the psychology of rumor: a series of subjects had to tell each other a certain story, one after the other. As Stern noted, it was easy to observe how the details and even the content of the story were altered the further the communication traveled from the original source.

Four decades later, Robert H. Knapp further explored the subject in an analysis dedicated to the psychology of rumor, classifying rumors according to the psychological mechanism that led to their development. Knapp found that there were three types of rumor: *pipe dream rumors*, resulting from wishful thinking, reflecting an (in)conscious public desire/need (e.g. the Führer was about to reveal an incredibly powerful weapon that would turn the tide of the war, a rumor widespread in Germany at the beginning of 1945); *bogie or fear rumors*, which arise from collective fears (e.g. the government is concealing information about the imminent collapse of oil reserves, and people will be tearing each other apart at the petrol pumps – the *Mad Max* scenario); and finally *wedge-driving rumors*, which refer not to a given situation, but to a person or group of persons whose goodwill towards the rest of the population is cast into grave doubt (e.g. the Jews kidnap infants and use their blood to make Passover bread, a rumor which, in the Middle Ages, could trigger savage pogroms whenever a child went missing).

In 1947, Gordon W. Allport and Leo J. Postman published *The Psychology of Rumor*, in which they built on the above-mentioned research. As part of an experiment, a subject was shown a photograph showing a scene of war and was asked to remember as many details as

possible. The same subject was then asked to describe what he had seen to a second subject. The second subject then passed on the description to a third subject, and so on.

The authors of the experiment observed that the further the story traveled from the *zero point*, the more it was altered, under the influence of three successive processes: *leveling* – the erasure of certain details, which drop out of the story; *sharpening* – the highlighting of other real or imaginary details/situations; *assimilation* – the distortion of certain realities depending on the subject's subconscious.

In the course of the present book we shall analyze a number of famous historical events, events on which rumors have made a decisive mark. Some of these rumors proved to be so effective that they have been transformed into beliefs widely accepted to this day, even though they are patently false.

You will recall, for example, the scenes from films or books that depict the Emperor Nero playing the lyre while Rome burned as a result of his own act of arson. What you should know, however, is that the fire of Rome is not even mentioned by the historians of the time (with the single exception of Tacitus, a fierce enemy of Nero), and that almost every year such fires swept through Rome, an overcrowded city whose buildings were mainly made of wood.

Believe it or not, seventy-one people were sentenced to death and executed in Sweden based on the fantastical 'confessions' of children who claimed to have been kidnapped by the accused and whirled through the air to a witches' Sabbath on a mysterious island. This took place in 1679, in other words not long after Descartes (*Cogito ergo sum*) died in the capital of the very same country, and at the height of the age of Leibnitz and Spinoza, not the dark Middle Ages. Below, we shall also see how even just two decades ago lives were destroyed by the false confessions of psychologically manipulated children, not in a faraway, superstitious, backward

country, but in the United States, the country that has won more Nobel Prizes in the sciences than any other country in the world.

So, not even the world today is immune to such rumors. The rumors spread by a radio station in Rwanda in 1994, for example, made a decisive contribution to unleashing one of the most terrifying massacres in the history of mankind, which resulted in the death of more than 900,000 people, all of them from the Tutsi ethnic group.

However, I have tried not only to describe such events, but also to explain just how these rumors came into being and what were the collective desires/fears that nurtured them at the time. Merely to conclude that the human mind has always been vulnerable to rumors, sometimes with lethal consequences, is not enough; it is important to understand not only *what* happens, but also *why* it happens. Why did the German people believe that communist saboteurs burned down the Reichstag and as a result stand by impassively while all parties other than the NSDAP were annihilated? Why did the French bourgeoisie allow themselves to be gulled by John Law during the *Mississippi Bubble*, an affair that contributed decisively to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789?

For at least three reasons, I think that it is important – particularly in the era of the explosive development of mass communications – to understand the complex mechanisms whereby rumors emerge and spread.

The first is that history has taught us that in certain circumstances rumors can be extremely dangerous, being employed as tools of manipulation, disinformation, and propaganda. The second relates to a deeper understanding of the way in which the most recent inventions – the Internet, social networks, electronic media – affect and will go on affecting our lives; the virtual world is a historically unprecedented vehicle for the spread of rumors. And the third has

to do with the wider and more nebulous idea of *progress*. In other words, are we less vulnerable to rumors today than we were, for example in the Middle Ages? Many readers might be surprised to learn the answer I have reached in regard to this question.