RUMORS, URBAN LEGENDS AND INTERNET HOAXES

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine those specific areas of rumor theory which serve as a connection between urban legends and Internet hoaxes. Subject areas to be highlighted include: why rumors or hoaxes are created and why they are transmitted, with specific emphasis on computer mediated communication. We will also examine the possible impacts that rumors, urban legends and Internet hoaxes may have on the business community.

INTRODUCTION

Did you hear that Joe is going to be fired? Delete this file from your computer because it is a virus (and then forward this to everyone in your address book). Put in your social security number on this website and it will search the FBI records and give you any information about you that is in the FBI records. Our company needs to verify your account information, please reply to this email with the account number and password. Gossip, rumors, and hoaxes have been around for ages, but computers and the Internet have elevated the passing of information to a new art form with sometimes disastrous consequences. In researching the literature for this paper it was discovered that a substantial amount of academic research has been done in the area of rumors; with much less having been conducted in the area of urban legends and Internet hoaxes. Throughout the literature on urban legends and Internet hoaxes, a common theme of rumor research and theory can be seen even though many theories have been proposed regarding rumor generation and transmission. Within these theories are two different schools of thought: psychology-based theories focusing on the individual and sociology-based theories focusing on group or societal factors (Rosnow 1988). Regardless of the focus, there are a number of common factors that continue to present themselves across the literature (whether it is from a psychological or sociological basis) as being necessary for the creation and/or transmission of rumors. This paper will examine those specific areas of rumor theory which serve as a connection between rumors, urban legends and Internet hoaxes. We will also examine the possible impacts that rumors, urban legends and Internet hoaxes may have on the business community.

EARLY RUMOR RESEARCH

Rumor research is not new, with the study of rumors by psychologists dating back over seventy years (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002). There are two particular sets of early theory (Allport and Postman 1947; Prasad 1935) that are frequently referenced across the literature. Part of what makes these theories significant are certain key elements which tend to be reiterated as important in the majority of subsequent research; even in those that present themselves as being in opposition.

One of the early detailed studies of rumor generation and transmission was performed by Jamuna Prasad in 1935. The keystone of Prasad's theory was the requirement for anxiety to exist for the transmission of rumors (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002; Prasad 1935). According to Prasad, rumor transmission frequency was directly linked to the level of experienced anxiety, with rumors spreading the most at peak anxiety and diminishing as anxiety levels subsided. Three additional key elements Prasad proposed were uncertainty, importance and belief: Prasad felt that rumors provide a sense of meaning and answers when situations do not permit clear understanding and control, particularly concerning issues not easily verifiable. Prasad further theorized that in order for rumors to persist, the subject matter must be important to those individuals within the transmitting group. In addition, as the uncertainty and anxiety levels increase, those group members who find importance in the subject matter are less able to critically analyze the rumor's credibility and veracity. Prasad's work was originally ignored by many researchers, but was eventually recognized as having validity (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002).

In 1947, Gordon Allport and Leo Postman published *The Psychology of Rumor*, which would become the definitive study of rumors for the next thirty years. In their analysis, Allport and Postman (1947) outlined what they called "the basic law of rumor", which concluded that the level of rumor transmission varied proportionally with the subject matter's importance to the group, multiplied by the uncertainty of the evidence available . As with Prasad (1935), Allport and Postman (1947) theorized that rumor creation and transmission was an attempt at finding meaning and answers in unclear situations, as well as recognizing the impact that importance to the group has (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002; Rosnow 1988). Accordingly, Allport and Postman (1947) felt that rumors were an attempt to lessen anxiety levels and their accompanying tensions (Bordia and Rosnow 1998). One of the primary limiters of Allport and Postman's research methodology was their use of the serial reproduction paradigm (Cornwell and Hobbs 1992), which is a one-way communication process not allowing for cross-examination by the receiver (Bordia and Rosnow 1998). This served to ignore the dynamics normally witnessed in face-to-face communication and its possible influences on rumor transmission. More recent research has recognized the importance of this dynamic and has taken it into consideration. The result is a more comprehensive understanding of the influences on why rumors live or die.

RUMORS AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

It is generally agreed that the formation of rumors are usually attempts at sense-making and filling the void created by the absence of information in unclear situations. For the purposes of this paper, we offer the following definition of rumor: A rumor is a hypothesis offered in the absence of verifiable information regarding uncertain circumstances that are important to those individuals who are subsequently anxious about their lack of control resulting from this uncertainty.

As such, there appears to be a general consensus among researchers, with some dissension, as to how rumors are typically born. A review of the literature seems to indicate that the real question of interest to researchers, more-so than how and why rumors are born, is how and why rumors are passed along. It is important to note, however, that rumor generation and rumor transmission cannot be viewed strictly as necessarily having separate and distinct causations.

The basic structure of communication consists of a sender (the one speaking or writing) creating a message by encoding their intended meaning, who then transmits/sends that message

to a receiver (the one listening or reading), who in turn decodes the message by assigning meaning to the words received. Words themselves may have no meaning since meaning is assigned by the receiver. It is the assignment of meaning by the receiver that can be one possible factor in a rumor's creation and transmission. In other words, a rumor can begin simply by the receiver's misinterpretation of the intended message, which is then transmitted to others (Kapferer 1992). In addition, the real or perceived absence of complete information can lead to the receiver filling in the blanks, thus altering the original intended message which is subsequently passed on (Kapferer 1992). It could likewise be postulated that the failure to fill in the blanks of a misunderstood message could act as a contributing factor to a rumor's continued transmission. In such a case, instead of acting as an offered explanation for an uncertain event or circumstance, it actually creates uncertainty through its incompleteness of information, prompting receivers to ask why and possibly leading to their filling in the blanks, further altering the message's original intent.

Sociological researchers recognized the importance of examining and understanding the role of communicative patterns in rumor transmission. University of California at Berkley sociologist Andrew Noymer concluded that "rumor transmission is one of the most natural forms of social communication" (Noymer 2001). In recent research, sociologists have proposed that within groups, opinions, explanations and predictions are exchanged until "an acceptable interpretation emerges" regarding a rumor's content and believability (Bordia and Rosnow 1998). In fact, studies have shown that the primary goal of such collective communication to be the determination of a rumor's veracity. Sociologists have termed this interaction as a "group problem-solving activity" (Bordia and Rosnow 1998).

THE STUDY OF COLLECTIVE COMMUNICATION ONLINE

The study of collective communication in a naturalistic setting has always been problematic for researchers. Among the issues faced in conducting this type of research are the problems of observation, data collection and recording, and remaining unobtrusive (Bordia 1996). The advent and proliferation of the Internet, referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC) networks by researchers, has significantly reduced these constraints, making it not only easier to collect and record data, but also allowing researchers to effectively eaves-drop in an ethical manner. Researchers are able to find and observe rumor discussions by monitoring the various newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms that are located on the Internet. Participants in these online discussion groups recognize that their communications are of a public nature, thus permitting researchers to avoid the issue of privacy violation more typically associated with attempting to observe face-to-face communication unnoticed (Bordia 1996).

CMC based research indicates that individuals participate in these discussion groups for the purpose of discussing the veracity of the rumor in question (Bordia 1996). Among other things, researchers have been able to determine that rumor discussion participants in a CMC environment exhibit the same group development characteristics as outlined in group development literature (Bordia and Rosnow 1998). In addition, discussions within the CMC environment exhibit many of the same fundamental communicative patterns and characteristics found in face-to-face communication (Bordia 1996), further validating the position sociologists have held concerning the importance of communicative patterns in rumor transmission.

THE URBAN LEGEND CONNECTION

A not so removed subset of rumor research is the study of urban legends. Many researchers contend that urban legends are not really a distinctly separate form of sociological communication, rather they are actually a form of narrative rumor. In fact, in most instances in the literature, urban legends tend to be referred to as rumor-legends. For the sake of brevity, we will simply refer to them as legends. As a point of connection, while legends tend to be more complex and story-like than rumors, both are transmitted with the intention of being believed, are told as being true, and are difficult to verify (Heath, Bell, and Sternberg 2001). In addition, in the course of studying legends and rumors, many of the stories analyzed share many similarities (Heath, Bell and Sternberg 2001). One key difference that separates legends from rumors is the fact that legends tend to have a significantly longer shelf life (or online life) than rumors (Noymer 2001).

Legends employ the use of an ironic twist to convey a message that typically reinforces social mores and norms by warning the receiver that negative results are likely should these norms and mores be violated (Donavan, Mowen and Chakraborty 2001; Kamins, Folkes and Perner 1997). Legends, in much similar fashion to most rumors, typically contribute to an increased transmission within groups by conveying negative information and may at times be centered around a particular product type or brand (Donavan, Mowen and Chakraborty 2001). Many times these legends are transmitted within groups as a way of warning other group members to avoid certain situations or actions, including the avoidance of particular products or brands (Donavan, Mowen and Chakraborty 2001; Kamins, Folkes and Perner 1997). The primary transmission vehicle of legends, as with rumors, is face-to-face communication (Llewllyn 1996). As with rumors, through the course of transmitting legends, information may be changed. One of the biggest differences is that typically with legends, the changes made are peripheral in nature, updating the time and location of the story, while the core message remains unchanged (Llewllyn 1996). This is in fact what helps contribute to the longevity of legends. Of particular importance in the transmission of legends is the use of the Internet, which makes it possible to communicate with thousands almost instantly (Donavan, Mowen and Chakraborty 2001).

INTERNET HOAXES

A hoax is defined as "an act, document or artifact intended to deceive the public." (Emery 2004). Internet hoaxes can be viewed as a subset of folklore legends; however, the key factor that separates an urban legend from a hoax is that a hoax is a deliberate deception (Emery 2004, West 1999). Most hoaxes found on the Internet can be classified as either Internet chain letters, computer virus/software hoaxes, medical hoaxes, rumors, jokes, or legends (Hoaxbusters 2004a). Internet chain letters may take on many forms: some require that the receiver pass on information to others in a group (usually by way of warnings or threats if information is not directly passed on to a certain number of people) while some tie into a receiver's greed or play to a receiver's sympathy. While the proliferation of the Internet, the computer virus/software hoax has quickly become one of the most prevalent forms of hoaxes. The first documented virus (2400 baud modem virus) occurred in October 1988 and since that time, not only has the frequency of virus hoaxes increased, but many continue to circulate on the Internet for years (Hoaxbusters 2004b).

WORD OF MOUTH COMMUNICATIONS

The communication process coupled with the transmission of rumors, hoaxes, and legends can and do have a direct impact on business, particularly when the subject involved is a firm's product. Marketers term the communication between consumers as word-of-mouth (WOM) (Kamins et al. 1987). The study and understanding of the impact and significance of WOM communications, whether the information that is being transmitted is true or false, is of great concern to marketers. One reason for this is due to consumers being influenced more by WOM than by any other source; including Consumer Reports, which is the best known objective source of consumer product information (Kamins, Folkes and Perner 1997). As with legend research, relatively few studies have been conducted concerning rumors in the marketplace. The research that has been conducted seems to indicate that, as with rumors and legends in general, negative product rumors tend to be transmitted more readily than positive rumors due to negative information being considered more indicative of actual product performance (Kamins, Folkes and Perner 1997). Factoring in the ease of dissemination of rumors and legends via CMC (especially through forwarded email) along with the issue of trust between communicating parties (i.e. "I trust the person that sent this to me, so this could be true"), word of mouth communication can spread as quickly as any computer virus.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

As rumor research has evolved toward the practice of exploring CMC as a research tool, so has legend and marketing research. One reason for this is the increased use of CMC by consumers searching for information before making a purchasing decision (Kozinets 2002). This need to understand consumer WOM is further enhanced by the knowledge that consumer support acts as a key factor regarding positive brand equity. More and more, consumers are utilizing CMC as a vehicle to discuss and voice their opinions concerning product preference and performance (Kozinets 2002; Mudhar 1999).

Negative product rumors also abound on the Internet in the form of hoaxed web sites and e-mails. Among the more prevalent Internet hoaxes are those that center around aspects of everyday life such as food safety and public health (Dayly 2004). These subject areas are especially fertile ground for rumor transmission in that they are considered as important by the receiving group members. With more and more consumers using the Internet as a source of information, hoaxed web sites are particularly problematic in that they more closely resemble legitimate information sources. The result is consumer confusion and a very real potential for firms and their products being harmed as a result of lost customers and damaged reputation. The issue has become such a problem that governmental agencies, such as the Food & Drug Administration, have implemented information programs in an attempt to combat many of these hoaxes and rumors (Dayly 2004). The Department of Energy's Computer Incident Advisory Capability staff estimated that the costs associated with a single virus hoax (note hoax, not a real virus) to be more than $40 million (Bedell 2002). Furthermore, the rise of popularity of internet websites which deal with the evaluation of the validity of internet rumors and hoaxes (ex., www.snopes.com) hint at the need for rational thought and evaluation of said rumors along with their associated costs. While it may be difficult to place an exact monetary amount on what internet rumors, hoaxes and legends cost each year, more research needs to be done to address

not only the direct financial costs, but the indirect financial costs that incur when a company's reputation and/or brands are harmed. Companies need to develop guidelines on how to deal with such negative rumors along with guidelines on deciding whether a rumor is "lethal" enough to warrant resources to disprove or fight its impact.

CONCLUSION

Rumors are an everyday fact of life; with some being completely implausible, and others seemingly difficult to refute. Another inescapable fact is that rumors, regardless of the shape or form they take, are an issue that cannot be ignored by consumer-based firms. Rumors can and do create significant hardships for those businesses that become targets. It would behoove business to not only pay attention to the rumor-related research that has been conducted, but to assist in the furtherance of research – especially that which is related to rumor transmission via the Internet. There will always be rumors; the trick to combating rumors is to understand how and why they are created and transmitted.

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