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# Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends[1]

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The terms 'gossip' and 'urban legend' are often used interchangeably with 'rumor' by both naïve laypersons and professional scholars. Consider our students as naïve laypersons: When asked to evaluate the terms 'rumor' and 'gossip' along certain dimensions, they rate them almost identically. When asked to 'think of a rumor', they frequently report a scandalous tidbit of gossip. Similarly, some of our colleagues – professional scholars of rumor, gossip and/or urban legends – also tend to use these terms interchangeably. For example, participants at a recent interdisciplinary conference on rumor and legend came to no consensus over what distinguishes rumor from legend; scholars of rumor and gossip at a recent conference of social psychologists also argued over whether rumor could be differentiated from gossip. This conceptual fuzziness has been noted for some time (Ojha, 1973). And though much progress has been made in sharpening the construct of rumor (Fine, 1985; Rosnow and Georgoudi, 1985; Rosnow and Kimmel, 2000), ambiguities still remain.

Meaningful and important differences do exist, however. In this article we further clarify the concept of rumor and distinguish it from its two cousins, gossip and urban legend. The source of conceptual difficulties has arisen from insufficient attention to the context and function of these genres of informal communication, and conversely, overmuch attention to content.[2] We therefore posit a definition of rumor focused upon contexts, functions and contents. We also examine contexts, functions and contents of gossip and urban legends, and explore similarities and differences between these three forms of social discourse. We begin with rumor.

## 1. Rumor

We define rumor as 'unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that


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function to help people make sense and manage risk' (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007: 13). This definition highlights three facets of social discourse: The context (the situation and/or psychological need out of which discourse arises), function (what people are trying to accomplish by engaging in the discourse), and content (the types of statements uttered). Let's examine each in turn.

### *Rumor contexts*

Rumors arise from situational contexts that are ambiguous, threatening or potentially threatening, and where people feel a psychological need for understanding or security. A context is ambiguous when the meaning or import of a situation is not readily apparent. Why are the offices being renovated? (no memo informed us; DiFonzo, Bordia and Rosnow, 1994). Who manufactures this soft drink that is only sold in inner-city (predominantly African-American) neighborhoods? (Freedman, 1991). What is behind spiraling gasoline prices? People have a core psychological motivation to understand (Fiske, 2004); not understanding is thus aversive and uncomfortable. An ambiguous situational context was fertile rumor soil for workers at a General Motors plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1994. GM had announced that the plant would soon be closed, but left unanswered the what, why, when, who and how questions. Rumors abounded: 'The plant will stay open to produce the Saturn, or the next version of the Chevrolet Monte Carlo, or the Japanese will take it over' (Rimer, 1992: 40). The noted sociologist, Tamotsu Shibutani, called such situations 'undefined'. They arise when information is not available or when information sources are not trusted (Shibutani, 1966).

Rumors also arise in situational contexts that are threatening or potentially threatening and when people feel an acute need for security. The threat may be tangible as when one's life is in danger ('The Port Jervis dam is about to burst – get out *now!*': R. H. Turner, 1964); one's assets may be lost ('The "good times" computer virus can wipe away your hard drive': Bordia, DiFonzo, Haines and Chaseling, 2005); one's security is tenuous ('The US plans to install a king in Iraq': Slackman, 2003); and/or one's well-being is at risk ('underarm deodorants cause breast cancer': Mirik, Davis and Thomas, 2002). People in these situations feel physically insecure and desire to enhance their sense of security. The classic office rumor – 'I heard that the department will be downsized, what did you hear?' – primarily manifests itself in a context in which the security and/or quality of one's job is perceived to be threatened (DiFonzo et al., 1994). Rumors after the deadly Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 arose in life-threatening and health-endangering contexts. And rumors among Iraqi civilians were often situated in a context of fears of dreaded possible events (Kelley, 2004); such rumors have been dubbed *dread rumors* by Knapp (1944).

Alternatively, the threat may be psychological in nature, as when one's sense of self, identity or indeed anything that one cherishes is challenged – one then feels psychologically insecure and desires to enhance the sense of self. The threatened sense of self may be personal, as when one's individual 'state' (i.e. situationally based) self-esteem is reduced by 'upward' comparison with similar others who are

more successful, or when a boss ridicules, intimidates or harasses an individual employee. In these examples, the targets of negative rumors arising from these contexts are likely to be the more successful other and the intimidating boss, respectively. In a recent radio interview on the topic of rumor, one caller – angry at his boss – confessed to spreading a false rumor that his boss had herpes; the rumor lasted at least two years. The threatened sense of self may also be collective (i.e. one's 'social identity') as when one feels that one's group is routinely discriminated against. False rumors that Tropical Fantasy Fruit Punch was manufactured by the Ku Klux Klan and contained substances that would make black men sterile (Freedman, 1991) arose in the context of African American identity threat. Lorraine Hale – an African-American psychologist – eloquently conveys the sense of collective threat: 'Having come from a slavery background, where *we were so brutalized* for so long, the *sense of fear we have as a people* is very real. There's a *mass paranoia* that the objective here is to *kill us out*, as easily and quickly as possible . . . This leads to watchfulness and caution and suspicion, enough to question the contents in a soft drink' (as quoted in Lerbinger, 1997: 159, emphasis added; see also Turner, 1993, and Turner and Fine, 2001).

### *Rumor functions*

Rumors function to make collective sense in an ambiguous situation. In undefined contexts, people attempt to make sense first individually – by thinking in terms of their own personal frameworks of understanding. When this doesn't work, they begin proposing, discussing and evaluating informal hypotheses with one another – collectively – these collective hypotheses and the associated discussion are rumor (Rosnow, 1974). In the week following the atomic destruction of Hiroshima, many such rumor hypotheses were discussed, for example: 'The Allied forces used a fine gasoline mist to destroy the city.' One of these was actually correct: 'The bomb resulted from energy released when small particles were split' (Miller, 1985). A second example: Citizens of former Soviet-bloc countries distrusted the official press and instead routinely relied on a vibrant rumor mill for information (Bauer and Gleicher, 1953). Modern-day conspiracy theory adherents possess a similar lack of trust in official media (Abalakina-Paap and Stephan, 1999) and constitute a massive network of rumor discussants (Coughlin, 1999). Thus, in ambiguous, unclear or confusing situations, people feel a need for understanding, and rumor serves a collective sense-making function: people discuss rumors so as to come to a group interpretation of their situational context. As R. H. Turner put it, rumor is part of *'normal collective information seeking'* (1994: 247, original emphasis) in which the group attempts to define an ambiguous situation with a *'lower degree of formalization* of many of its component acts' (Shibutani, 1966: 23, original emphasis). Verification norms and message source credibility are often relaxed, but it remains a group sense-making activity.

Rumors that arise in tangibly or psychologically threatening contexts function to manage that threat. In the case of tangible threats, humans have a core social motive to control their environment so as to act effectively (Fiske, 2004). The control

afforded by rumor may be 'active' in that the rumor enables the recipient the opportunity to actively avoid or neutralize the threat. Hearing the dam is about to burst affords one the opportunity to leave town quickly. Hearing that a computer virus will erase my hard drive allows me to delete email messages marked 'good times'. Hearing that the US plans to install a king in Iraq affords me the opportunity to aid the resistance that will stop this from happening. Hearing that underarm deodorants cause breast cancer allows me to refrain from purchasing that type of product. Hearing that one's department may be downsized allows one the opportunity to send out one's resumé – just in case. In these situations the rumor participant seeks 'primary control' (Walker, 1996). The control afforded by a rumor may also be 'secondary' in that the rumor enables the participant to interpret the dreaded negative event in a way that reduces its emotional impact, such as by lowering one's expectations, predicting the worst to avoid disappointment, or attributing the event to chance (Rothbaum, Weisz and Snyder, 1982; Walker, 1996; Walker and Blaine, 1991). Faced with the loss of house and home in the aftermath of a terrible tsunami, for example, I may eagerly participate in rumor discussions about how and why the region was so devastated. After the senseless acts of September 11, 2001, I may gain hope by hearing the tale of someone who safely rode the rubble down 80 floors of the collapsing World Trade Center tower (Marks, 2001). Though rumors are underinvestigated, research suggests that they function primarily to afford this type of control: All the university campus rumor content analyzed by Walker (1996) contained themes related to secondary control. *Wish rumors* – of wished-for events (Knapp, 1944) – may afford secondary control by raising hopes in the face of challenges of all sorts. For example, the wish rumors 'The war is over!', 'We're getting a big end-of-year bonus this year!', and 'She'll grade us on a "curve"', may help one cope with the stressors of war, personal finances and college tests, respectively.

Rumors arising in contexts that are psychologically threatening to one's individual or collective sense of self often function to defend that sense of self. This frequently occurs in the form of negative rumors about the perceived threat. The angry employee who spread false rumors that his boss had herpes felt a sense of glee that his superior had 'gotten his just desserts'. In preliminary results of controlled experiments where participants envisioned themselves in workplace scenarios, we found that participants whose psychological contract with their supervisor had been breached were much more likely to spread a negative rumor about that supervisor. The function of such rumors is to defend against harm to one's sense of individual self. Rumors also function to defend against harm to one's collective sense of self. Among people whose Islamic religion is central to their sense of identity, the false rumor that the Israeli Secret Service alerted 4000 Jews to refrain from going to work at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (US Department of State, 2005), undoubtedly helps defend against the uncomfortable notion that all of the attackers were Muslim fundamentalists. Rumors that black people routinely sell rented appliances for money to pay for drugs undoubtedly function to defend against the sense that one's identity as a white person in society is under attack. These types of rumors, like 'Eleanor Club' rumors – e.g. 'black servants were found using the "lady of the house's" combs' (documented by Allport and Postman, 1947) – serve to defend against the sense that one's group (in this example whites) is being systematically

hurt by another (blacks) by portraying them in a negative light. By comparison, this helps to boost one's view of one's group and, by extension, oneself. In short, rumors in these contexts function to build oneself up by putting other groups down. Such *wedge-driving* rumors – rumors that derogate other people groups – are very common (Kelley, 2004; Knapp, 1944).

Rumors can perform other functions, such as entertainment, communication of group norms, and defining social network power structure and boundaries, but this is not their primary role. Passing rumors of a soda pop's eugenic effects on black men may indeed enhance my relationships with others in the African American community (Bordia and DiFonzo, 2005), but the main purpose for spreading it is to warn others not to drink it – this is a collective threat-management function. In sum, rumors function is to make sense and manage threat (or potential threat) in contexts that are ambiguous, uncertain or pose a potential threat to tangible or psychological assets.

### *Rumor content*

Rumor contents flow naturally from their contexts and functions. In ambiguous or threatening contexts in which people are discussing rumors to make sense or manage threat, these rumors are information statements in circulation that are perceived as useful by participants and are unverified. Let's unpack these contents. Rumors are first of all information statements, that is, they are declarative rather than directive or interrogatory. 'George W. Bush is drinking again' (DiFonzo, 2005), 'John Kerry hypocritically stated that his favorite Bible verse was John 16:3' ('Verses, Foiled Again!', 2004) and 'Osama bin Laden has been sighted in Utah' (Cantera, 2002) are first nouns and verbs that tell, describe or explain. Parts of the rumor discussion of course may question or direct (Bordia and DiFonzo, 2004) but the rumor itself is an informative idea or set of ideas. Second, the information statements are communicated through people – they are never simply a static thought in the mind of a solitary individual. Obviously, if the sense making process is collective, the 'sense' being made must be passed around. Therefore the fundamental character of rumor is that it is transmitted. This transmission has a *serial* (A tells B tells C and so on down the chain, with or without discussion), *cluster* (A tells a cluster of people, who then tell one or more people), or *'multiply interactive'* (the rumor recirculates actively) configuration (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007, in press); the point is that it moves. Rumors are like memes in this way: ideas that survive – or don't – amid an 'environment' of minds (Heath, Bell and Sternberg, 2001).

Third, these information statements in circulation are perceived by their 'hosts' as relatively useful in some way (Rosnow and Georgoudi, 1985). This follows from our previous discussion of context and function – rumors help collectives to make sense and/or manage threat. They are not seen as primarily amusing tidbits of information (gossip) or as interesting tales that usually contain a moral lesson (urban legends); rather, they tend to be seen as significant or 'outcome relevant' (Rosnow, 1991) by participants. They may be like news in that they often add some *new* bit of information to a situation that people are seeking to make sense of or deal with effectively.

Indeed, Shibutani (1966) labeled rumors 'improvised news', signifying their current interest to groups in the face of absent or distrusted news sources. Rumors may also have to do with items of longstanding interest (Rosnow and Kimmel, 2000) such as sorcery, satanism and sadomasochism; they are rumors to the extent that they help collectives make sense or manage threat. For example, Jeffrey Victor (1989) documented 'satanic panic' rumors (e.g. 'Police found evidence of bloody animal sacrifice rituals') in western New York State as attempts to make sense of the rapid liberalization of societal attitudes and mores.

A central feature of collective sensemaking and threat management is the verification of information – determining what is so and how to act in case it is so. Thus, the fourth, and perhaps most characteristic, feature of rumors is that they are unverified. By this we simply mean that a rumor's evidential basis is weak. To verify is 'to prove to be true by demonstration, evidence, etc.; to confirm' (Agnes, 1996: 683) – unverified statements, therefore, are unproven, not demonstrated to be true, and are unaccompanied by 'secure standards of evidence' (Allport and Postman, 1947: ix). As Rosnow put it, rumor is 'constructed around unauthenticated information' (1974: 27). The key to understanding this aspect of rumor is the adjective 'secure'. Think of statements that have some degree of importance to you. Confidence in these statements may accrue from 'evidence' of various kinds: your desire that the statement be true, how well it accords with other statements in which you have confidence, how well employing the statement in daily life 'works', your social clique's consensus opinion, your first-hand experience in the matter, credibility of the source of the statement, or whether or not the statement was validly derived from true premises. The point is that some of these evidential bases are more secure than others; some will hold up to more intense scrutiny, and some will not. I may have a degree of confidence in or act upon the false statement that Pop Rocks candy will explode in my stomach if ingested with soda pop (Fine, 1985) because other sixth-graders do and it seems to accord with my rudimentary notions of the chemical properties of this candy and of carbonated beverages. But these types of evidence are not firm – they quickly crumble when a credible source (e.g. a teacher) tells me that this is simply not true or when I experiment with the mixture myself and fail to experience gastric distress.

Many (perhaps most?) rumors are properly labeled as having an insecure basis of evidence. This subset of rumors is often prefaced with a cautionary statement 'I'm not sure that this is true, but . . .' or 'I heard that . . .'. Other rumors are simply passed along without any backup and are self-evidently insecure. But others are passed along as facts, without any hint of doubt while being transmitted, and often refer to evidence that is later discredited. An example of the latter were the false rumors of anarchy, chaos, rape and killings in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 that the news media reported as true based upon statements by the mayor and police chief of New Orleans; these statements later turned out to be unsubstantiated (Dwyer and Drew, 2005; Gillin, 2005).

Evidential security is conceptually related to verity for false statements only. That is, a true statement – one that corresponds with reality – may be accompanied by secure or insecure evidence, but a false statement can only be accompanied by insecure evidence. I may hear that a journal by the name of *Diogenes* published a

special issue on rumors because my colleague actually read it (secure basis) or because my 6th-grade child heard about it from her classmates (an insecure basis). Thus a rumor may indeed be a true statement; what distinguishes the true rumor *as a rumor* is its insecure basis. In contrast, assuming that true statements describe realities that are more permanent, false statements can only be accompanied by insecure evidence (as in the Katrina example). That is, a false statement cannot be accompanied by a secure basis of confidence. The point, once again, is that a rumor may be true or false; what qualifies it as a rumor is that the evidence for its verity is insecure. The difference between news and rumor is helpful here; news is (hopefully) always confirmed, but rumor is always unconfirmed (Shibutani, 1966).

## 2. Gossip

We define gossip as 'evaluative social talk about individuals . . . that arises in the context of social network formation, change, and maintenance . . . [and that fulfills] a variety of essential social network functions including entertainment, maintaining group cohesiveness, establishing, changing and maintaining group norms, group power structure and group membership' (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007: 19). Let's examine gossip contexts, functions and content first, and then specifically compare it with rumor.

### *Gossip contexts*

As rumors arise in response to undefined or threatening situations that highlight the human needs for understanding and security, gossip arises in response to situations (or potential situations) of social isolation that highlight the need for belonging. (Rumor then functions to reduce ambiguity, threat, or potential threat; gossip to lessen social isolation or potential social isolation.) Isolation is aversive, maladaptive and unhealthy. A core human motive is therefore to belong – to form and maintain relationships with others (Fiske, 2004). People do this by seeking to create, fit into, sustain or recast a network of social relationships for themselves. Gossip helps them do that. Put simply, gossip arises in situational contexts where one is aiming to meet the need for belonging, that is, where one is forming, changing or maintaining one's social network (Smith, Lucas and Latkin, 1999). If one desires to find, make or maintain their place in a group, certain features of the social network are of interest. These include: Raw information about people in the network, existing or potential bonds between people in the network, information about the group as a whole (size, history, purpose, activities, attitudes) and especially informal rules (norms) by which the group functions, power structure of the network (e.g. who is the leader, who are the outcasts), communication structure (e.g. who talks to whom), and group membership (who is 'in' and who is 'out'). From these features of the social network flow certain functions that gossip performs and content that constitutes gossip.

## *Gossip functions*

People use gossip to accomplish certain social network formation, change and maintenance functions (Foster, 2004). First, people use gossip to learn important social information about other individuals in the group, often without ever having to meet these individuals. The newcomer is quietly informed: 'Oh yes, be sure that you do not interrupt Harry – he is very touchy'. Or 'Have you met Sally? She is quite amiable.' This is rather useful information in forming my social network: I'll avoid Harry and approach Sally. More broadly, gossip enables one to 'keep tabs' on a much larger number of people than if one were required to have contact with them personally. Dunbar (2004) proposed that gossip is what enabled social groups to become larger; I have only so much time, energy and brain circuitry to devote to interpersonal relations; gossip affords me the opportunity to know something about – and be known by – the larger clan, village or community.

Second, gossip helps builds social networks by bonding people to one another. It does this by providing common amusement – we laugh together at someone else's antics (Rosnow and Fine, 1976). 'Did you hear about the stunt that Matt pulled at the Christmas party?' Together we are entertained (Gluckman, 1963). More broadly, gossip makes us feel closely bonded (Smith et al., 1999). Sharing social information with another person is similar to primate grooming – it affiliates us (Dunbar, 2004). Consider the question 'To whom do you gossip?': your friends or people with whom you wish to be closer, not your enemies. We know we are accepted by another when they share a tidbit of gossip with us. Gossiping thus gains us friendship and alliances.

Third, social-network formation and change is not accomplished merely by bonding; it is also achieved by breaking existing bonds that compete (e.g. getting Tamara to be my best friend instead of yours). As is well known, through negative gossip we also ostracize a third party (Smith et al., 1999), usually when they are not present (Eder and Enke, 1991). 'Brittany wears way too much make-up!' 'Frank is a homosexual!' 'Agnes is a stuck-up snob!' are usually considered pejorative comments and imply that one should not associate closely with Brittany, Frank or Agnes. Gossip is thus a well-known avenue of 'relational aggression' (Crick et al., 2001). When discussing the topic of gossip with our students, they often relate extremely painful episodes of social exclusion that occurred by means of gossip.

Fourth, gossip enhances social status, power or prestige within a group (Kurland and Pelled, 2000). By denigrating other people, we build ourselves up by comparison. Some evidence exists for this. In a recent study, for example, where participants recorded and rated their social interactions each day for a week, gossiping made participants feel more empowered and popular, and that their social status had been elevated (Hom and Haidt, 2002). Kless's participant observation study of an elementary school social structure also showed how gossip was used by girls to maintain the exclusivity of their social clique: gossip was employed mainly by the 'leading crowd' rather than 'middlers' or 'pariahs' (1992: 138–40). Further, participants in a lab experiment preferred and intended to transmit negative and damaging information about non-allies, and positive information about allies; the authors of this investigation concluded that gossip served a status enhancement function

(McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002). And, high-frequency gossipers in a college sorority were more active and influential in the sorority than medium- and low-frequency gossipers (Jaeger, Skleder, Rind and Rosnow, 1994). These results all point toward there being a status-enhancement function in gossip.

Finally, gossip informs us of what to do in order to gain admittance into and remain part of social networks (Baumeister, Zhang and Vohs, 2004; Noon and Delbridge, 1993). It lets us know what the group norms are, usually by social comparison with other people (Suls, 1977; Wert and Salovey, 2004), either those we know (*proximate* gossip about those in our milieu) or those we are unlikely to know (*distal* gossip about celebrities). 'Cheri is so *hot*!' (be slim and attractive). 'Jeremy "brown-noses" his teachers' (don't flatter your professors). 'Madonna is a slut' (don't be promiscuous). Such normative control can be very stressful (Maundeni, 2001). A special class of norms pertains to detecting and punishing 'free riding' behavior – taking advantage of group benefits unfairly (Foster and Rosnow, 2006). 'Jacques is lazy' (do your fair share of the work).

### *Gossip content*

To perform these social-network formation, change and maintenance functions, gossip content is evaluative social chat – usually negative – about individual or private behavior (Foster, 2004). Although gossip may be either a positive or negative evaluation, most gossip is probably negative, derogatory or slanderous (Rosnow and Georgoudi, 1985). Walker and Struzyk (1998) content-analyzed a sample of gossip heard on a college campus: 68 percent of it was intended to shame the target while only 2 percent venerated the target (although see Dunbar, 2004, for a contrary finding). Gossip is also about an *individual* behavior pertaining to more private/personal spheres of life ('Tricia is dating a married man', 'Bart drinks', 'Selma has child pornography on her computer'). These characteristics follow from gossip functions: sharing a titillating tidbit of (usually negative) gossip about another person's private behavior informs others, strengthens my bond with the recipient, enhances my status through comparison, excludes the target, and communicates what the group norms are.

### *Rumor vs gossip*

How are rumor and gossip similar? Rumor and gossip are often used interchangeably in common parlance (Rosnow, 1974); and, as we mentioned previously, our students routinely rate the terms 'rumor' and 'gossip' equivalently. Gossip and rumor are similar in that they may both be considered as commodities that people exchange for valued assets (Rosnow and Fine, 1976). They have both been referred to as 'unofficial communication' (Kapferer, 1987/1990), 'informal communication' (Michelson and Mouly, 2000), and 'hearsay' (Fine, 1985).

But as we have seen, rumor and gossip differ. Rumors are unverified and potentially useful information statements in circulation that arise in ambiguous, threaten-

ing and potentially threatening contexts and help people make sense and manage threat. Gossip is evaluative social chat about individuals that arises in the context of forming, changing or maintaining social networks, and functions to inform, bond, exclude, enhance status and convey norms. These differences manifest themselves most clearly in the content of these two forms of social intercourse in at least three ways (Rosnow, 1974; Rosnow and Georgoudi, 1985; Rosnow and Kimmel, 2000): rumors are unverified, but gossip may or may not have solid foundations of evidence. Also, rumor is considered by discussants as a topic of some urgency, significance or usefulness; gossip – while a very important feature of social life – is typically perceived by participants as less significant. Rumor is like news in that it is of interest to people but gossip is considered 'idle chatter' (Sabini and Silver, 1982). And, third, rumors may or may not concern individuals; gossip is always about the private affairs of individuals.

Though they differ, 'nebulous forms' do exist – hybrids that are hard to categorize as either rumor or gossip (Rosnow, 2001: 211; see also Fine, 1985). President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky exemplifies this idea: Discussion of this affair was evaluative and entertaining social chat, about private behavior, that qualified as gossip; yet because Clinton was a sitting US President, the matter was significant and people made serious collective attempts to make sense of the matter by passing around unverified information statements, i.e. rumors. Elsewhere (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007) we have proposed the use of information dimension scales to quantify the extent to which the pattern of differences exhibited in such nebulous forms matches both rumor and gossip.

## 3. Urban, modern or contemporary legends

We define urban, modern or contemporary legends as 'stories of unusual, humorous or horrible events that contain themes related to the modern world, are told as something that did or may have happened, variations of which are found in numerous places and times, and contain moral implications' (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007: 23). Note first that the term 'urban' is really not quite accurate – these legends have more to do with modern/contemporary subject matter (dating, technology, carcinogens, hitchhiking) – as opposed to traditional material (knighthood, ogres, witches, sleeping princesses) – than a cosmopolitan location (Mullen, 1972). Hence the terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' are used interchangeably with 'urban'.

### *Urban legend contexts*

Victor Frankl proposed that the primary motivation of human beings is to find or make meaning. He diagnosed the aimlessness and purposelessness that many people feel in our modern era – in which the meaning-making systems of church, neighborhood and school have become less influential – as 'nöogenic neurosis' and developed logotherapy (literally: word or meaning therapy) – to treat it (Frankl, 1959). Modern legends might be considered a type of logotherapy in that they pri-

marily function as meaning-making, value-endorsing and mores-promoting stories. Urban legends thus arise or are spread in contexts where meaning is made through storytelling, where bits and chunks of life are interpreted in an entertaining way (Brunvand, 1981). Many social encounters afford the opportunity to tell a good (meaning-making and entertaining) tale, including casual conversation, campfires, putting children to bed, internet chat episodes, sermons and social gatherings. Though rumors and gossip might also be spread at these social encounters, it is helpful to note here how their motivational contexts differ: The context for urban legends is the general need for meaning (which leads to making meaning through urban legend storytelling) rather than the need to belong (which leads to the formation, change or maintenance of social networks through gossip) or the need for understanding in an ambiguous situation (which leads to the making of sense through rumor) or the need for control or self-enhancement in a potentially threatening situation (which leads to threat management through rumor).

### *Urban legend functions*

Contemporary legends function to make meaning by telling tales that promote moral and cultural values and that amuse us. The traditional American legend that the United States' first president George Washington confessed to chopping down a cherry tree – 'I cannot tell a lie' – exemplified and enshrined the virtue of honesty (Allport and Postman, 1947). Such tales point toward deeper cultural and moral values (e.g. honesty is worth more than personal loss). Modern legends do the same; they have a theme or a meaning. There is *moral* to the story. Kapferer (1987/1990: 123) stated that urban legends are 'exemplary stories . . . since, like fables, their function is to set forth examples from which moral implications can be drawn'. An example is found in the contemporary tale of 'The Boyfriend's Death': On the way to a party, a teenage couple hears a news flash that a lunatic killer is on the loose; at that point the couple's car stalls. Unable to get it started, the boyfriend decides to go for help alone (the girlfriend is in high heels and a party dress). He urges her to cover herself with a blanket and remain in the car until she hears three knocks on the window – the signal that he has returned. She later hears knocks – but they continue beyond three – they are the dreadful sound of the boyfriend's corpse knocking against the car as he hangs from a tree limb above. Brunvand (1981) explained how this contemporary tale not only conveys the moral lesson to avoid dangerous situations but expresses the theme of helplessness and fear outside the security of the home, especially for young women (the world is a dangerous place). Similarly, the modern legend that students went blind from looking directly at the sun after taking LSD expresses the warning 'Don't take drugs!' (Wilke, 1986). Contemporary legends are thus like fables that focus on 'fears, warnings, threats and promises . . . ' (Bennett, 1985: 223).

Continuing in this vein, urban legends often contain the funny and the horrible, but the 'horror often "punishes" someone who flouts society's conventions' (Van der Linden and Chan, 2003). The 'Nude Surprise Story' exemplifies this: One morning a man was feeling sorry for himself because his wife and kids had forgotten that today

was his birthday. At work, however, his secretary remembers and offers to take him to lunch and martinis. After this she invites him to her apartment for another martini. She goes to her bedroom to 'slip into something more comfortable', and a short while later she returns – with his wife and kids and a large cake to celebrate a well-planned surprise birthday party – only to find that, anticipating a different kind of celebration, the man has taken off all of his clothes (Brunvand, 1981). The protagonist was punished for intending to have an extra-marital dalliance, and this story carries the moral message: 'Don't fool around!' Notice also that while urban legends function to convey mores and values, they do it in an amusing and engaging way. The stories recounted in this section are quite interesting to tell in social settings and very enjoyable.

### *Urban legend content*

As in the tales recounted in this section, urban legends contain first a story – a setting, plot, climax and denouement. Second, the events told in these stories are unusual, horrible or funny. It is rather horrible to discover that, after entrusting your dog to a non-English-speaking waiter at a Chinese restaurant for safekeeping during your meal, your pet is then served to you on a silver platter – the victim of a language translation misunderstanding (Brunvand, 1984). Such stories are of the 'strange but true' variety (Fine, 1992: 2). Third, the material making up urban legends is contemporary in nature (Fine, 1992), exploring topics of interest to the modern citizen (e.g. technology, food contamination, dating, automobiles, organ removal, contraceptives and the internet).

### *Rumors vs urban legends*

How are rumors and urban legends similar? Both are verbal expressions arrived at through collective processes (Mullen, 1972). Both are a type of unofficial information (Kapferer 1987/1990). Both can be subject to distortion through transmission; concrete details are sometimes added so as to make the message more plausible (Allport and Postman, 1947; Mullen, 1972).

But as we have seen, rumors and urban legends differ. Rumors are unverified and potentially useful information statements in circulation that arise in ambiguous, threatening and potentially threatening contexts and help people make sense of and manage threat. Urban legends are narratives about funny, horrible or unusual events related to the modern world, that arise in storytelling contexts and function to convey meaning, mores and values. These differences manifest themselves most clearly in what they attempt to make coherent, their structure and their variability. Let's consider each of these.

First, we note that while both attempt to make coherent understandings – rumors make sense of ambiguous situations while urban legends make meaning of the world (Mullen, 1972) – the scope of what rumors attempt to make sense of tends to be much more specific. For example, urban legends are typically not spread during

company downsizings because, though they may help in understanding the broader meaning of the situation (e.g. 'All of life is temporal', 'Treat people fairly because they are valuable', 'The rich get richer and the poor get poorer'), they are of limited value in making sense of the specific situation (e.g. Who will be laid off? How will layoff decisions be made? When will the first cuts be made?). Rumors therefore pertain to much more topical, current, urgent and specific concerns in their content than urban legends do.

Second, because rumor sense-making is often contemporaneous while urban legend meaning-making is often post hoc, the structure of each tends to differ. Rumors are shorter, non-story-like bits of information without an established plot. They are like daily events occurring serially over time and so their overarching meaning is unclear. Urban legends tend to be longer, with setting, plot, climax and denouement told at once in a neatly laid-out story (Caplow, 1947; Fine, 1985; Mullen, 1972; P. A. Turner, 1993).

Finally, urban legends are notable for their variation, whereas rumors are anchored in place and time (Kapferer, 1987/1990). The same urban legend – with details adapted to the current place and time – shows up in different locales and at different times. Urban legends are therefore called *migratory* – they are 'brought up to date' and located locally (Kapferer, 1987/1990: 29). The story of the captive soldier who sent a secret message behind a postage stamp on a letter reappeared during various wars (Allport and Postman, 1947). It has been proposed that rumors are sometimes urban legends that recur from time to time – when they framed in a specific locale and time, they are rumors (Dingwall, 2001; Rosnow and Fine, 1976). The reverse idea has also been proposed: that rumors that persist for long periods of time mutate into legends (Miller, 1985). Whatever the direction of development, the distinctive point is that urban legends tend to include families of stories whereas rumors are rather specific to a place and time.

## 4. Conclusion

We began this article by noting that 'rumor' is sometimes used interchangeably for 'gossip' and 'urban legend', even among scholars. In an attempt to conceptually clarify the meanings of each of these genres of social discourse, we have attempted to explore and juxtapose three aspects of each: the situational and motivational contexts from which they arise, the functions they perform and their contents.

First, we proposed that rumors arise in situational contexts of ambiguity, highlighting the psychological need for understanding, and leading to the use of rumors to make sense. We also proposed that rumors arise in situational contexts of threat or potential threat, both tangible and psychological, highlighting the psychological needs for control and self-enhancement, and leading to rumors that help to regain a sense of control and defend a threatened sense of self. These contexts and functions produce rumors that are comprised of unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation.

Second, we posited that gossip accrues from the human need to belong and arises in contexts where one is attempting to form, change or maintain social networks.

Gossip functions to render social information about people in the network, to bond them together, to exclude rival others, to enhance status and to convey group norms. As a consequence, gossip is evaluative – and usually negative – social chat about individuals' personal/private behaviors.

Finally, we argued that urban legends – synonymous with modern or contemporary legends – stem from the human need for meaning and arise in contexts where stories are told to yield meaning. Urban legends therefore function to convey mores and values, and they do so in an entertaining fashion. As a result, the contents of urban legends are funny, horrible and humorous events, woven into narratives that adapt to various locales and times. We hope that the explorations offered here will be of use in future theorizing and research involving these three types of social discourse.

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## Notes

1. Portions of this manuscript elaborate and extend ideas originally presented in DiFonzo and Bordia (2007: Ch. 1).
2. We are guided in part by the contextualist assertion that a better understanding of a human action is inextricably bound up with the context of that action (Georgoudi and Rosnow, 1985; Rosnow and Georgoudi, 1985). Similarly, the primary approach taken in this manuscript is 'situational' as defined by Fine (1985).

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