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Viral Buzz: Rumor and Its Disruptions in Pandemic Uncertainty

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Abstract

Building on theory and research on rumor dynamics, I examine how the search for and acquisition of information during a time of medical crisis relies on the *politics of plausibility* and the *politics of credibility*. In this, I examine how the content and the source of information affects the spread of uncertain knowledge during periods of disaster, recognizing the social dynamics of ignorance, a key issue for domains of knowledge of which the public has little ability to judge. The assertion of multiple truth claims about the current pandemic leads to challenges to previously taken-for-granted realities, but also potentially provides solutions. The dynamic may be different in conditions that require an immediate response and those that evolve over a longer period (fast and slow rumors). Using rumors about the COVID-19 pandemic, I address how epistemic disruption undercuts established norms (disruption-of) but also creates the possibility of desirable change through new negotiations, strengthening community (disruption-for).

Keywords: Rumor; Knowledge; Disruption; Pandemic; COVID-19.

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Contemporary publics reside in a fishbowl of facts: a world of promiscuous claims. Which ones are we to believe and on what basis? How does authority and power bolster belief and marginalize doubt? What is likely and what stands beyond an epistemic boundary? Can we trust our social relations to discern hazy truth? And can the adjustment of alternate perspectives generate interactional harmony? These questions are central to the interpretation of rumor, conspiracy, post-truth, uncertain information, and contemporary legend.

As a community, we rely on a secure obduracy of the world, a world that is knowable. Human sociality depends on this confidence. A radical constructionism, however appealing as a theorist's game, destabilizes more than it solves. Knowing becomes a power play. Fake news, mischievous assertions, and bogus claims have long troubled us, even though they are now perceived as central to our current season of doubt. Disagreements and distrusts create conditions permitting alternate understandings of the past, views of the present, and expectations of the future. Nowhere are these challenges more salient than when considering the disruptions caused by unsecured information in the context of disasters, such as the global public health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 virus. What might otherwise have been embraced as consensual knowledge claims are disrupted, and this epistemic trouble is evident in a culture of rumor in which some judgments must be made rapidly (depending on improvised news (Shibutani, 1966)) and others only develop over time (spreading through a communal grapevine (Fine & Ellis, 2010).

While battles over what constitutes legitimate pools of knowledge occur in many domains (Maines, 1999), they are particularly evident when assessing scientific/medical discussions for which members of the wider public have only uncertain and insecure knowledge. This skepticism and uncertainty potentially lead to distrust of these proclaimed experts when their demands push against the desires of those who are the targets of their advice. This is clearly evident in the resistance to the advice of national and local virologists, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci, and the skepticism of those who doubt the validity of vaccines (Larson, 2020). Further, as scholars in the sociology of knowledge have long argued, rumors appear, expand, and spread at times of social stress, particularly in response to threatening uncertainty, often before the extent of the disaster has been fully understood, communicated, or responded to by authorities. This is clear in rolling disasters as with the recognition of pandemic diseases (Lee, 2014; Bodner et al., 2020; Kitta, 2019), such as AIDS and now COVID-19, but equally in the case of slowly emerging disasters, such as illnesses caused by environmental degradation. While natural disaster has been a primary case study for the examination of rumor because of its immediacy, in this essay I focus on the medical disaster of the COVID epidemic over the past year.

1 Rumor and the Pandemic Death Knell

In assessing the variety of claims made about the novel coronavirus, a consideration of belief and trust are vital. In this, the politics of plausibility and the politics of credibility are central. Specifically claims must make sense given a belief in the world as we know it (plausibility) and must come from trusted claimants (credibility). Both are linked to power: the power of epistemic consensus and the power of authoritative sources. These concepts permit us to parse the multiple truth claims spread about the pandemic in light of how they fit a shared epistemology (Fine, 2015).

The claims made about the COVID virus, its origins, cures, and the role of scientists are diverse and alternatively amusing or disturbing in light of their potential for disruption of communal responses. As I am not an epidemiologist or a clinician, I do not address their accuracy,

other than to note that in a world of viruses, physicians, and medical practices, there is truth to be found. However, there is a role for a sociologist to examine the effects of truth claims. For a claim to be a rumor, it is not that it must be false, but rather it is information that is unverified by those who are defined as being in a position to know. As Zerubavel (1997) points out in his promotion of cognitive sociology, knowledge — and presumably truth — is always positioned within a world of status and authority. We think as members of a social group, not as individuals or as a species, and our judgements of what is plausible and who is credible are shaped as a result.

In a world in which beliefs may be sharply contested and defined by politics, and in which mistrust is often evident, many — from multiple perspectives — believe that claims about COVID-19 represent "fake news" or deliberately slanted information. It is not simply that the information is incorrect or unproven, but that claims are being proposed by those who have a specific interest to mislead. This justifies a lack of trust and a belief in strategic disruptions. Trust depends on seeing each claimant as part of a collaborative search for truth, a view central to the sociology of knowledge. When this is not assumed, knowledge claims are viewed as weapons, using disruption for political advantage. Such malign agents may include national actors, whether Russian, Chinese, or American, or subnational interest groups.

In uncertain situations, claims emerge that contest with those that are officially promoted, but the claims of officialdom can be challenged. Although it is frequently remarked that we must "follow the science," "science" often is filled with competing claims. Even many scientists cannot entirely judge the obdurate reality of viruses. No one scientific orthodoxy exists, although there may be a preponderance of opinion, a set of beliefs that evolves over time. We must decide which scientists to follow, a challenge of credibility when viewed from outside of a social field.

Rumors about the COVID virus fall within several broad categories, including folk cures or propensity to become infected with the virus, but for this brief essay that addresses epistemic disruptions, I focus on claims of conspiracies in originating and spreading the virus.

2 A Viral World of Conspiracies

As might be expected, public concern focuses on how the virus originated, and, following from this in a conspiratorial vein, whose interest did it serve? Conspiratorial beliefs ask the question: Cui Bono? Who benefits? We look for responsibility. We assume that a disaster and our response cannot simply be a random fluctuation, biological perturbation, or unintentional error. Whose decision contributed to the disaster?

At the outset of the spread of the novel coronavirus, the leading explanation — and still a likely one — was that the virus transferred to human hosts in a Chinese "wet market" in the large city of Wuhan, a location where live animals are bought and sold. Perhaps the virus is zoonotic and jumped from bats or pangolins (a scaly anteater) to humans. In addition to the fact that epidemiologists know of zoonotic viruses, this claim had appeal in the West in that it emphasized the otherness of the Chinese. Consuming a bat or an anteater demonstrated the cultural divide. This claim had emotional punch for an uncertain public.

Soon claims about the origins of COVID-19 spread beyond zoonotic illnesses (Bodner et al., 2020). Wuhan, the epicenter of the Chinese outbreak, is the location of the Chinese Institute of Virology. The coincidence allowed for the suspicion on which rumor feeds and it could be used by those in the West — and particularly in the United States — who mistrusted the intentions of the People's Republic of China. During the election year, this claim could stand

in for a need to confront the PRC, labeling the disease, as President Trump did, "the China virus." While some alleged that the virus escaped from the laboratory unintentionally, suggesting an absence of competent security, others, more conspiratorial, felt that the viral escape was deliberate, designed to produce international chaos. The apparent success of the Chinese in controlling the virus after the first few weeks provided support for those who saw this as justifying their lack of trust in the Chinese government and, extending that in a disruptive fashion, to the Chinese people. Perhaps the virus was a bioweapon or that the goal was to wreck the American economy. In turn, some in China, with their own agenda, suggested that the virus was spread through an American military base or by the CIA to kill Chinese citizens or to ruin their economy. These rumors are, in effect, mirror images. Even if some doubt these claims, they are seen as plausible explanations. If the actual violence against those of Chinese descent seems small, the pattern of mistrust is large.

While the Chinese connection was the most prominent claim, some rumors pointed to the spread of the virus as resulting from the activities of other malign actors, again asking who benefits, denying trust to shadowy and powerful elites, frequent targets of previous claims. Some explained that the outbreak is a Zionist plot for world domination, while others point to the pharmaceutical industry that hoped to profit from medicines or vaccines. Still others suggested a plot by Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, to profit from his own vaccine or perhaps to permit Microsoft to track the activities of those who are vaccinated. The power of the Gates Foundation and the resistance to the power of social media companies made Gates a plausible target. One sees something of the same suspicion in rumors that global investor George Soros owns a laboratory that works on COVID-19 vaccines. The fear of his global influence, particularly among those who see him as an agent for leftist or Jewish control, made the claim plausible when promoted through media that the audience considers trustworthy. Perhaps connected to these claims is the belief that the virus was created by President Trump's opponents (perhaps Soros or Gates) to defeat his likely re-election. Mistrust can attach itself to any purported villain, as long as the audience sees the claim as reasonable and the promoter as knowledgeable.

Finally, some rumors point to the developing 5G cellphone networks whose electrical fields either produced or spread the virus. While the linkage may seem obscure, the timing and the ambiguity of the technology permits the claim that can justify opposition to this technology that will enrich cellphone companies (just as earlier rumors referred to the dangers of the original cellular towers and electrical poles).

The variety of rumors and conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus are too vast to describe in depth here, but I underline that the claims that some audiences found plausible are linked to disruptions of current political realities. Taken together rumors provide a map of patterns of mistrust toward those in authority.

3 Fields of Disruption

Tavory and Fine (2020) have argued that it is essential to distinguish between disruptions-of and disruptions-for. The first is straightforward as disruptions can divide groups, undercutting continuing interaction by emphasizing the centrality of conflicting worldviews and interpretations. This leaves the outcome a function of power and resources. However, we also suggest, perhaps counter-intuitively, that some disruptions are disruptions-for in that by questioning taken-for-granted perspectives, we can promote new and more effective collaborations, reaching across epistemic divisions. These disruptions-for, while producing debate, builds the commitment of a community to resolving disagreements. For example, contention over the use of

facemasks and the amount of social distancing that is desirable can have disturbing elements of disruption-of when it reveals the contrary worldviews of hostile groups, but it also provides the possibility of disruption-for to the extent that these debates, while inevitably contentious, lead to eventual reconciliation as the parties recognize a middle-ground based on shared civic concerns over the value of health and sociality.

Inevitably uncertain knowledge — rumor — responds to larger contesting forces, as in this case emphasizing its role on occasions of medical and scientific trauma. One is unlikely to find rumor — at least in such great abundance — if all accepted "authoritative accounts" from officialdom or had the background to judge specialized, but crucial, knowledge. The power of "I heard that" in interaction among trusted colleagues often overwhelms the pronouncements of experts, providing an opening for disruption and the flowering of rumor.

Claims that individuals and their groups accept must make sense considering the world as understood. This explains the acceptance — by some — of the conspiracies cited above. Rumor scholars have argued over the past seventy-five years that the extent and intensity of rumor results from the importance of the event, coupled with its ambiguity and the lack of critical ability of the audience (Allport & Postman, 1947; Chorus, 1953). The more importance, the more ambiguity, and the less critical ability, the more rumors will flourish. This assumes that we can specify the importance of the events under discussion, the ambiguity involved, and the ability of the audience to judge the claims when they fall outside our domain of knowledge. While the judgment of importance is relatively consensual, ambiguity may be ambiguous itself. It can spark creativity or lead to ontological dismay. Further, as students of conspiracy theories recognize, who has the authority to judge critical ability can be a political matter.

In *Improvised News*, the classic study of rumors in the immediate aftermath of disaster, Shibutani (1966) argued that people collaborate to manage an ambiguous environment and one with direct effects on their survival. Disasters with immediate consequences have been iconic examples (tsunamis, tornadoes, or flash floods). But not all disasters are as rapid as these natural calamities. Others, and pandemics are a prominent example, may spread through society more slowly, allowing for claims as to their severe or mild effects and judgments assessing those who are providing "official information."

While the collective sensemaking of rumor is central to community stability, the process can also separate and upset. As Fine and Ellis (2010) argued in *The Global Grapevine*, this process was dramatically evident in the days and weeks after the terrorist violence on 9/11 as Americans speculated about the possibility of subsequent attacks and the responsibility for the attacks that had occurred. In time, Americans developed multiple interpretations, some of which led to hostility toward Muslims and others toward the American government. Similar rumor-based disruptions were spread in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. Should we mistrust gay men or those in occupations that were seen as gay-friendly, such as restaurant servers, or was it a CIA plot gone awry? Fear of the Chinese echoes today, including, ironically, toward some restaurant servers. The disruption-of society through rumor was clear, but what about disruption-for change as we need to collaborate on a response to the novel coronavirus? Can the evaluation of uncertain information provide a new consensus as implausible claims are weeded out?

How can we judge what best to believe? This returns us to plausibility and credibility. Do the claims seem believable, given shared experiences of the world as lived? If they do, does the communicator seem trustworthy, considering our past experiences? We interpret future horizons by evaluating the claim (belief) and personalizing the source (trust). We judge what we hear based on whether it make sense in light of how we define what is likely and on our connection with the narrator. Our responses depend on whether we wish to disrupt the social

setting in which the information is spread. While seemingly embracing doubt — or alternative realities — rumor privileges claims that the interactants share.

In much communication, networks are clustered or even cliquish. The people that we know are likely to know each other. By trusting each other, our friends avoid the epistemic disruption that interpersonal suspicion produces. This permits information to flow smoothly; however, it limits external checking outside the community. Psychologists label this process "groupthink" (Janis, 1972): the situation in which a close-knit group chooses not to reach outside its membership to acquire alternative views or diverse options for action. To do so might create tension that would make internal cohesion difficult. Our friends are likely to have similar ideas of when to wear masks and how far apart to stand. We avoid the tensions of disagreements and rumor, providing the illusion of confident claims. Without a push to consensus, friendships might dissolve. Relational structures shape the extent to which a community's beliefs can be disrupted. Bounded clusters are prone to become silos or echo chambers in which unsecured information is accepted when others have the same view.

4 Fast, Slow, Hot, and Cool Rumors

Rumors — all truth claims, actually — are embedded in two distinct realms of sense-making: emotions and cognition. When rumors spread, we hear fearful stories about COVID-19 and when they seem plausible, we trust the tellers. Our judgments are shaped within the crucible of social relations. Outside that circle, doubt remains. In accepting this reality, we think and feel as members of meaningful groups and our evaluations are shaped as a result (Zerubavel, 1997). Interpretations of the world are inevitably social. Rumors gain power because they add — or appear to add — knowledge as well as creating boundaries with what is false or misleading. In this case, rumor is tied to our considered thoughts, perhaps coolly rational, even if incorrect. In contrast, some rumors are powerful because they bolster emotions, and these we can refer to as hot rumors. Rumors can be thoughtful or emotionally intense.

In addition, rumors can be fast or slow, addressing an immediate crisis or interpreting a crisis that evolves slowly: tsunami rumors or those depicting rising sea levels; Ebola or AIDS. While we seek answers, rumors that we recall and that we transmit are those that excite and entertain us. This is the rumor paradox: a desire for security and for thrill. COVID rumors have components of each, as we judge how we might avoid infection and speculate on who might have caused the problem.

If we prize considerations that are slow and cool, we also must cope with excited and rapid responses. Information in either case is not necessarily accurate. It has been remarked that some rumors are "too good to be true," insisting that we refrain from doubting those claims that support our deepest desires. However, some rumors are "too good to be false." This means that they fit into our beliefs in such a cozy and compelling way that we ignore the weaknesses in their evidentiary basis. To challenge them leads others to condemn us as disruptive of their taken-for-granted phenomenology. Either cognition or emotion can mislead us, as we may believe that pandemics may vanish or expand, based on faulty assessments of expert knowledge.

Rumor scholars Allport and Postman (1947) wrote of an "effort after meaning," creating a comprehensible world. This effort can be readily appreciated. We are driven to comprehend the chaos that surrounds us when confronting strain, uncertainty, disorder, and even viral death. These rumors call for a response and by embracing them, we hope to read the future. Are authorities hiding the truth (the death count is much higher), do they have hidden inter-

ests (investing in pharmaceutical companies), or are they in league with enemies (protecting Chinese politicians).

Rumors may help audiences interpret a changing environment. At times this can produce disruption-for: finding a new "epistemic normal," if not an "interactive normal." Nowhere is this more evident than as we speculate on dangerous mutations of the COVID-19 virus or vaccine evaluation as shaped by politics. We extrapolate from the bits of data that are available, often from those whom media sources designate as "expert," possibly providing comfort, but also forcing us to wonder about the basis of this honorific designation. If this form of coping is not always desirable from an institutional perspective, denigrating knowledge from experts and authorities, it matters greatly as individuals work through complex emotions, wavering beliefs, and deep fears. This is seen clearly in those conspiracy rumors, noted above, that claim to expose the hidden plots of the powerful, ethnic out-groups, or global enemies. Will we accept that the virus "escaped" from a bioweapons lab in Wuhan, and, if so, should we despise the lab's minders? This would be a disruption, but not one leading to a better future.

Conspiracy stories are often carriers of uncertain information. Can we evaluate what is real through unseen viral plumes and auditory coughs? Conspiratorial claims depend on the disruption of the authority of institutions, postulating powerful evildoers who deserve condemnation. Rumor scholars such as French folklorist Campion-Vincent (2005) argue that there are more accounts of conspiracies currently than in the past, and they increasingly target elite actors and organizations. This response is apparent in the global rise of populism, nationalism, and nativism. While the evidence that is produced is rarely definitive and almost never from "experts" (defined by those very institutions that we mistrust!), those in the conspiracy community open a screen to reveal actors whom they consider to be malicious puppet masters. In conditions of mistrust, rumors blossoming from skepticism have fertile soil to take root. This sensitivity to conspiracy is what historian Richard Hofstadter (1964) has labeled a paranoid style, recognizing that people often claim that what appears on the surface hides a deeper, dangerous reality. When we confront fast crises — moments that demand immediate action and that depend upon accepting the claims of those with institutional responsibilities — such suspicions produce a destructive civic response. We attempt to cope through sharing claims and beliefs that address the valence of ambiguity, sorting through claims in finding a world that makes intuitive and social sense, but lacking accuracy.

5 Disruptive Knowledge and Comforting Ignorance

The flowering of rumor in a pandemic age suggests a vibrant arena of uncertain knowledge, a world of challenge and contention. In a world in which shadowy conspiracies are possible, some hope to change the subject, redirecting our eyes. This does not mean that there is no obdurate truth, but rather that facts are not orphans and must have parents to introduce them into polite society. In a mass democracy, political reputations are rarely known directly, but are known through those who shape those reputations: supporters, opponents, and those who serve these interests in the mass media. These individuals are reputational entrepreneurs (Fine, 2001).

Within the realm of rumor scholarship, many search for truth: readings of the world as told by experts (Sunstein, 2009). This is a noble goal. And it is understandable. People reasonably believe that the world is knowable; life would be too fearsome without this belief, and people, especially those without authority, present unofficial knowledge claims.

The linkage of the obduracy of the world and the influence of the sociable community allows for a rumor to permit its audience simultaneously to know and not to know: a doubling of the epistemology of rumor. As a result, rumor has a duality: an acceptance in the community of discourse and a fragility as events move in such a way as to make problematic assumptions of plausibility and credibility.

Yet, what about ignorance? How should we think about not knowing? Rumor and ignorance are cousins, but not identical twins. Rumor presents a claimed truth, while ignorance directs our eyes away, suggesting the dangers of unofficial knowledge, a comforting choice for those committed to maintain the status quo. A lack of awareness does not simply happen but occurs because of power structures that encourage this absence. We may be persuaded that some questions should not be asked or answered. Groups may wish to keep topics hidden or unaddressed because it serves their interest. The disruption-of rumor can lead to conflicts that the powerful wish to avoid. With sufficient information control, ignorance is solidified. Just as facts have provenance, so does their absence. Not knowing and forgetting what had been known do not simply happen; reasons exist for ignorance (High, Kelly, & Mair, 2012). Agnotology (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008), as the study of unknowing is called, is an extension of the sociology of knowledge as applied to the producers of knowledge. Some things are considered not worth knowing — or even dangerous — at particular times and places. We see this in the desire, for example, not to examine potential explanations of the linkage of race and infection and death from COVID-19. Digging too deeply into these fraught questions might be socially destructive, particularly in light of the recent push for racial justice. Not knowing can, in some circumstances, avoid the disruptions-of that generates hostility and that challenge consensus. The question of what can be known and who has the right to make these truth claims is central to the spread of uncertain knowledge.

This field of research is particularly prominent in science studies. The approach involves seeing scientific practice as an occupation and as a form of knowledge construction. Such an approach demands that we ask how facts are uncovered and how they are accepted by a professional community. However, the examination of ignorance and "non-knowledge" is also valuable. The account of historian Proctor (2012) of what we know and what we do not know about the health consequences of tobacco and cigarette smoking reflects the politics (and the economics) of ignorance, resulting from realms of power. The same might be said of viral treatments, such as hydroxychloroquine. For Proctor, ignorance does not just happen; he argues that creating ignorance is strategic and political, and it is undeniable that some industries — perhaps pharmaceuticals — can avoid troubling information that they wish to shield from the public gaze.

Interest groups present or prevent data that they hope to incorporate in the public record, persuading their audiences and tamping down dissention. As in the case of rumor scholars who search for truth, those who examine conspiratorial theories often have a firm belief as to which claims are valid, which scientists are experts, and who should be respected. We see this in the case of COVID-19 in which some claimants are judged as standing outside expert knowledge, too bizarre or too political to be treated with respect. Serious knowledge communities hope to demonstrate that firm consensus exists and those with informational power attempt to suppress dissent, suggesting that there are boundaries on what can be taken as plausible and boundaries on who is considered to be a credible promoter.

Ultimately, not every disruption is a disruption-of. We recall those brave AIDS activists who presented their challenges an example of disruption-for, as scientists were forced to confront these grievances. However, often those who wish to continue what is treated as a "set-

tled" debate are stigmatized by those who control what is taken as secure knowledge, attacking the self-interests or competence of their opponents, erasing their assertions. (Consider, for instance, the opprobrium aimed at Anti-Vaxxers). These controversies are about the legitimacy of facts, but they are crucially about the right to believe. Who can control knowledge? While rumor suggests that there are many paths through which knowledge claims can be made, firmly established ignorance could prevent the disruptions from below to which elites object.

6 Rumor, Disruption, and Disaster

Research on rumor, uncertain knowledge, and promoted ignorance is a means to understand the consequences of disruptions to the social system, particularly at times of crisis. One might suggest that, given the multiplicity and elasticity of problems, societies are always in a state of crisis. Still, one might see the broad and lasting effects of the novel coronavirus as a special case in which nations and people must respond to uncertainty both rapidly and deliberately, determining whom to trust, who has expertise, which therapies work, and which vaccines are most promising, while keeping politics at bay. Given the urgency of the COVID-19 disaster, medical claims become doubted by some.

We know that rumors — information that is unsecured — can spread disruption and dissention. With beliefs about the manipulative power of elites, debates over mask-wearing, the safety of restaurant dining, the legitimacy of outdoor political rallies, and the effects of 5G towers have been intense and have led to protests. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once claimed that everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts. Moynihan was famously a member of the cultural elite, men who felt that they could authoritatively determine what facts *are*. However, the vibrancy of rumor suggests that who controls facts and expertise is precisely what is at issue in understanding the politics of plausibility and the politics of credibility. Disfavored groups must openly engage in disruption. The question becomes whether it is disruption-of or disruption-for.

These debates when fairly and respectfully handled can provide a means through which disruption of previously taken-for-granted worldviews can work to benefit society. We see this in many domains. The Sunrise movement *has* changed the perspective of even those who are might otherwise doubt human ecological effects. Perhaps not all the demands of the Green New Deal have been — or should be — accepted, but increasingly there is a recognition that concern is warranted. We must be proactive stewards of the environment. This is disruption-for. We are witnessing this in pandemic politics, where even President Trump and Republican governors are now open to masking and some closures, responding to a cacophony of claims and the reality of viral illnesses. Again, we see disruption-for. These examples reveal that unauthorized information and that marketed as expert combine to create social change. The viral buzz of claims reminds us that debate is not destruction. Rumor is vital.

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