

1. They are *information statements*. We're not talking about the *opinions* that people share. Instead, rumors are meant to be informative.
2. They are *in circulation*. In other words, if you have your own personal conspiracy theory that the moon isn't real, it's not a rumor if you never tell anyone.
3. They are *unverified*. This is key. If I'm at a high school reunion, and I try to spread the news that Jeff and Tina just had a baby^[1], that's not a rumor if Jeff and Tina posted the baby's picture to Facebook. Yes, it's informative and in circulation, but since it's been definitively *verified* as true, it's not technically a rumor.
4. Finally, rumors are "*instrumentally relevant*." They answer questions that people want answered because they feel important or significant. If there's a rumor that your office is laying people off, that's *instrumentally relevant* because that information impacts your life! Some have called rumor spreading a "*group sensemaking activity*" because they serve to help people understand an ambiguous situation.

The Psychology of Why People Spread Rumors

If you've been paying attention, the primary *function* of a rumor is to make sense of something that's already unclear. Rumors help explain a confusing element of the world. In the soda rumor I opened with, the tensions between groups of people are scary and confusing. "Why are bad things happening?"

This confusion opens the door to rumors, which people can hold onto in order to give them at least *some* idea about why the world is working in the way that it is.

In 1947, Gordon Allport and Leo Postman published the book, *The Psychology of Rumor*. Although rumors were a pretty hot topic in social psychology around that time, it got more and more difficult to study rumors well. In the last several years, however, there's been a renewed interest in the psychology of rumor. Here's a quick review of what that research has found.

1. People Spread Rumors When There's Uncertainty

It's when we don't already have a firm grasp on how or why things are happening in the world that rumors start to spread. If you can imagine being in middle school again, imagine what would happen if one day, out of the blue, one of your classmates stopped coming to school. There's a ton of uncertainty there, so people would probably develop and spread rumors as a way to get a handle on what happened. In fact, a field experiment in 1955 did just that: the **researchers**

strategically withdrew a student from a grade school class without explanation. Not surprisingly, rumors started to fly as students tried to make sense of the situation.

2. People Spread Rumors When They Feel Anxiety

Oftentimes uncertainty breeds anxiety—we like to have a clear sense of the world, and we get anxious when we feel uncertainty—and anxiety on its own has been linked to rumor spreading. Some research has shown that more anxious people tend to be the ones who are more likely to spread rumors.

Another fascinating experiment made some students feel especially *anxious* about an upcoming interview. **The students who were made to feel more anxious spread rumors more quickly than the less anxious students in the control group.**

Research has also shown that “dread” rumors (i.e., rumors that something bad is going to happen) spread more than “wish” rumors (i.e., rumors that something good is going to happen). This is the case both for rumors spread online and for rumors spread in person.

3. People Spread Rumors When the Information is Important

As much as you might be dying to talk about the rumor you heard about the company you work for, I probably don't care a ton. The reason is that it's just not that *relevant* to me. I, on the other hand, would be itching to talk about some other rumor that's more important to me. In fact, Allport and Postman's “*basic law of rumor*” that they developed in 1947 was that spreading rumors depends on both the *ambiguity* of the situation and the *importance* of the rumor. Across a whole bunch of studies, **people are more likely to spread rumors when the information is more important to them.**

4. People Spread Rumors When They Believe the Information

Let's face it—if you hear a rumor that you think is completely ridiculous, you probably won't find yourself on a mission to spread that information far and wide. For example, one study looked at the spread of rumors during a university strike. **It was the rumors that were more *believable* that ended up spreading the most.**

5. People Spread Rumors When it Helps Their Self-Image

Plenty of research has shown that people often want to feel good about themselves, but one way people can do that is through rumor spreading. There are a couple reasons this can happen. One is that spreading a rumor positions you as someone who is clued into what's going on in the world. People might then come to you as the one who's especially informed.

Another way rumor spreading can boost self-esteem is when the rumor is about another group. Other research has shown that putting down other groups can boost people's self-esteem. Lots of rumors, it turns out, are about a group's "opposing" group. These have been called "**wedge rumors**" and serve to reinforce intergroup differences. Clearly, these can boost self-regard by elevating one's own group about a rival other group.

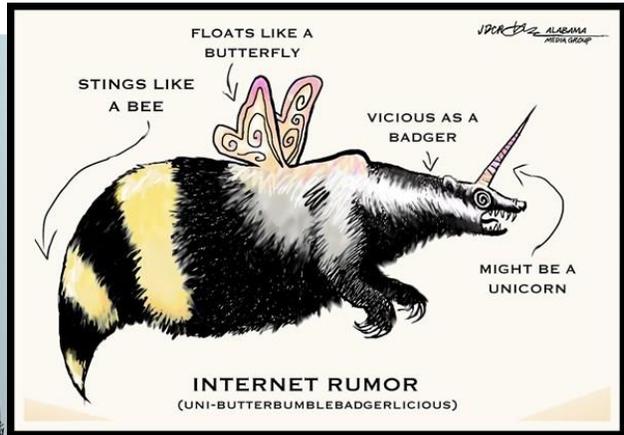
6. People Spread Rumors When it Helps Their Social Status

This might sound like reason #5, but there's a subtle difference. Reason #5 was that people feel better about themselves when they help spread rumors. There's a little more to it, though, which is that **people can use rumors to strengthen their social ties**. Want to be accepted by a group? Pass along some rumors about their rival group.

The evidence for this can be seen in studies where people tell different rumors depending on the person they're telling them to. Specifically, the question was whether people would pass along a rumor that one school group's ranking had *decreased* or whether they'd pass along a rumor that the group's ranking *increased*.

The results showed that it depended on who would be receiving the rumor. If it was someone who was *part of that group*, people were more likely to spread a positive rumor about them. If it was someone who was part of a rival group, then people were more likely to spread the negative rumor. The point is that people spread rumors strategically, to gain the respect of others.

Rumors in Society



Type 1 – FIVE LINES:

Based on the cartoons above, determine how our society views rumors.

Good Boo or Bad Boo: The Rumors of Boo Radley

Step 1: Based on Part I, specifically Chapters 1-5, create a list of everything mentioned about Boo Radley using quotes and page numbers in your journals.

Step 2: In groups, compare lists and add anything that you might have missed.
NOTE: Everything on list should be backed up by the text (quotes)

Step 3: Fill in the T-Chart below inferring what you think is true about Boo Radley and what are just rumors.

Step 4: As a class, we will create a master T-Chart which will test your inference-developing literary argument skills.

Boo Truths	Boo Rumors

