

onto one another. The former consider the political actors 'still oblivious to the vital role of communication.' Jmahri, director of Al Itihad states: 'Rumours intensify when institutional communication is absent.' Naciri does not share his opinion: 'The political class have an obligation to communicate. However, an absence of communication can never justify disinformation.' The politicians, for their part, accuse media professionals of 'slipping all too easily into disinformation.' While Moukrim insists that, 'Faced with rumours, journalists have to be careful. They must cross-check information, and take the time to speak to all those concerned. In other words, return to the ABC of journalism.'

## Conclusion

An analysis of rumours in the Moroccan political sphere sheds an important light on several aspects of public life. Politically, the monarchy remains disengaged from any meaningful public communication. This is a process that should ideally consist in an ongoing exchange rather than merely one-directional 'communication'. The status of the monarchy and its prior and current experiences reinforce this status quo. The only noticeable change in recent years has been the King's use of new communication channels in order to dispel rumours.

The absence of a structured communication strategy contributes to the propagation of rumours in political circles. Political life in Morocco, as such, offers an open playing field for the use of rumours as a weapon in the service of political competitors.

Finally with the media, journalistic practice is still characterised by breaches of ethics, which allows for rumours to be easily relayed. Despite the Moroccan context where access to information is an uphill battle, journalism must overcome this obstacle in order to carry out its principal mission, to search for verified, corroborated and ordered information - it is the most effective antidote to rumour.

1. For more on this topic, see Mouhtadi Najib, Pouvoir et communication au Maroc: Monarchie, médias et acteurs politiques (1956-1999), L'harmattan (2008).
2. Meaning the 'bloc'. A coalition of four opposition parties: Istiqlal, USFP, PPS and OADP. The first three of these parties would later agree to form a government in 1998.
3. For more information on this subject, read Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, Quand le Maroc sera islamiste, La Découverte (2007).
4. Nickname given to King Mohammed by the foreign press in reference to his laid-back approach during the first years of his reign.
5. From Quand le Maroc sera islamiste, p.232

6. Ali Amar, Mohammed VI, le grand malentendu. Calmann-Lévy (2009), p. 78
7. Sylvain Moullaird, Maroc: parler de la santé du roi reste tabou, Libération (8 September 2009) [http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2009/09/08/maroc-parler-de-la-sante-du-roi-reste-tabou\\_580255](http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2009/09/08/maroc-parler-de-la-sante-du-roi-reste-tabou_580255)
8. For more information on the reporter's version of events, see Ali Amar, Chut ! Le roi Mohamed VI est-il malade? <http://www.demainonline.com/2013/04/05/chut-le-roi-mohamed-vi-est-il-malade/>
9. The last interview given by the King dates back to 2002. Contrary to his father, Mohammed VI does not favour this mode of communication.
10. Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, Quand le Maroc sera islamiste, La Découverte (2007), p.206. Translated by Sarah Morris for Perspectives.
11. The government of Bekkay Ben M'barek is the first Moroccan government since independence in 1956.
12. The Socialist leader paid the price for a rumour suggesting that his imprisonment in 1981 had been a deal agreed with Hassan II.
13. A rumour on the homosexual habits of this Socialist leader was published by the Moroccan newspaper *Akhbar al-Ousbouaa* in 2004. Its editor was sentenced to a six months fixed prison term. The author of the article was given a six month suspended sentence.

\* Translated from the French by Sarah Morris

# The Anthropology of Rumour

Omar Brouksy

'Gossip', 'chit-chat', 'tittle-tattle', 'it is said', 'hearsay'... the terms and expressions that refer to the phenomenon of rumour are in no short supply. Nowadays their multiplicity, the many forms they take and their impact on the daily lives of groups and individuals is widely recognised. However, the scale of rumour's impact remains difficult to grasp, so much so that this phenomenon, ever a hot topic, is at once complex and constantly changing.

How do rumours begin? What forms do they take? What are the methods of amplification that transform a simple rumour into a societal phenomenon with sometimes disastrous, and more often unchecked consequences? What role do truth, cross-checking and verification play in the transmission and exchange of information and data?

All these questions lead us, firstly, to reflect on how rumours begin and on the main characteristics of a phenomenon that continues to intrigue sociologists and anthropologists. We will then examine the methods of amplification of rumour, and the new challenges brought about by the digital revolution, evident most notably in social networks and so-called 'news' sites.

## The origins and bases of rumours

Some define rumours as a process of exchanging information whose veracity is not (yet) established. Rumours lie on the fringes of 'facts', but at the heart of social, daily relations between individuals and groups, and can be found in most political, economic and financial structures.

Others describe rumours through their principal characteristics; ephemeral phenomenon, at once fragile and fickle. If their

ephemeral side is often highlighted, rumours nonetheless install themselves by the fact that they are exchanged, relayed and transmitted from one individual to another, and from one group to another. They can also leave their mark by the consequences of their dissemination.

In more concrete terms, the spreading of a rumour entails the seizing of a news story and its appropriation by 'taking it one step further', or by 'adding a layer', before communicating it to an individual, group, or even a media institution.

This process of transmission, through the exaggeration or partial distortion of a piece of unconfirmed news, is not a recent development. As a societal phenomenon par excellence, rumours have always been at the heart of everyday human behaviour, always inspired by preconceived cultural, political and historical notions.

Rumours can piggyback onto short news items, spreading and taking on epic proportions. They can also be born in the wake of a moment of strong emotion in the history of a country, as was the case in 1955 during the return from exile of Sultan Mohammed V, grandfather of the current king of Morocco, Mohammed VI. According to a collective rumour that over time became a national 'legend', Moroccans could spot the face of their Sultan in the moon. This vision would quickly anchor itself into the collective imagination of millions of Moroccans, and offer itself as a tool of cohesion in response to the European coloniser in particular, and all that is in opposition to the aspirations of a nation in general. Rumours are therefore a complex collective construct sandwiched between archaism and modernity, past and present, anxieties and euphoria, moments of doubt and feelings of superiority. As soon as they are born, rumours becomes 'bulimic',



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feeding on all that composes the context in which they are deployed, including worries, fears, cultural myths, social representations and frustrations of all kinds. The example of what is known as 'Jihad al-Nikah' (sexual jihad) is in this regard highly indicative of the frustrations that interact with rumours. In December 2012, a Saudi sheikh, Mohamad al-Arefe, announced in a tweet that women were authorised to 'get married to a jihadist for a few hours, and then to other jihadists so as to strengthen the morale of combatants and open the doors to paradise.' This statement, immediately denied by the Saudi sheikh, spread like wildfire throughout the Arab world. Syrian state media seized this false tweet and made a song and dance over it. In September 2013, in a new development the Tunisian Minister of the Interior Lotfi Benjeddou 'added a layer' to this rumour by announcing that Tunisian women had left for Syria to carry out 'sexual jihad' in support of Islamist fighters. In April 2014 the photograph of a young Saudi girl called Aisha, who had supposedly also travelled to Syria in order to practice 'sexual jihad', was published by an Iranian website (Bultan News). However, several days later, Iranian bloggers revealed the true identity of the young Aisha, who was in fact a porn actress.

*'Details disfigure or exaggerate the rumours that like a bulimic monster, gorging itself on whatever lies in its wake, and then throwing it back up again in a regurgitated form, takes advantage of not only a favourable context, but of human nature itself.'*

The example of this rumour, born of a fake tweet which went viral, shows to what extent a news story that is neither cross-checked nor verified can feed on the frustrations of an, at once broad and heterogeneous population, and take on almost global dimensions. In short, the process of birth and dissemination of rumours often takes the form of 'stories doing the rounds', 'splashes', 'gossip', news stories that 'spread', chatter and tittle-tattle. Details disfigure or exaggerate the rumours that like a bulimic monster, gorging itself on whatever lies in its wake, and then throwing it back up again in a regurgitated form, takes advantage of not only a favourable context, but of human nature itself.

In his will to be and to exist, the individual that spreads rumours seeks to assert and feed his ego by assuming the role of both source of information and reference for the 'other', even for an entire group. It is the relation of the individual to the collective that is

highlighted in the emergence and spreading of rumours. It is a relationship based on mutual interactions, which contributes to the shaping and amplification of information. In this social dynamic, the emergence and proliferation of what is known as 'New means of communication and information' (NCMI) has turned upside-down all concerns linked to the phenomenon of rumour, and notably participated in its amplification.

## Methods of amplification and new challenges posed by rumours

Rumour, it is said, is the oldest media in the world. It has always been present in human relations, in all societies, and across time. The history of humanity attests that rumours have accompanied the evolution of societies, from the Chinese Empire to Sub-Saharan Africa and passing through Western Europe. For a long time the Great Wall of China was, for instance, considered by the country's population to be the single construction on Earth visible from the moon. Another example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, several men were lynched because a rumour had suggested that they were able to reduce the penis size of every person who shook their hands.

In the 19th century, a great breakthrough took place; rumours became urbanised under the combined effect of a relentlessly industrialising society, and the proliferation of methods of communication and the transmission of news. Related to this, at the beginning of the 20th century, propaganda emerged as a tool for mobilising the masses, a phenomenon that would reach its peak in Nazi Germany.

The correlation between a strong image and a hard-hitting, simple and precise text, can boost the use of rumours to undermine the image of a political actor, or destroy his or her career. During Barack Obama's first presidential campaign (2008-12), his adversaries regularly cast doubt upon his birth in the United States, with the aim of weakening him politically. This was carried out through persistent rumours spread by the great American media machine. Owing to rumours, information often slips into approximations and conjectures that are propagated today by means of the internet, Facebook and Twitter, at an uncontrolled speed.

The veracity or falsity of a news story is no longer the exclusive domain of a media sector with a responsibility to verify and cross-check.

A new actor has arrived on the scene as a result of the new means of communication: the web user. He/she might be a blogger, the webmaster of a site or simply an individual possessing an account on one or several social networking sites. Yet his/her power to deliver news stories, to construct and amplify them, is considerable. Profiting from strong emotions, a sensitive context or a favourable collective state, the web user can manipulate a news story by amplifying it, and consequently, distorting it. Extending beyond the local and national levels, rumours can now acquire a global dimension in a matter of minutes.

In July 2014, several web users published a rumour that an armed Libyan group had taken control of the airport of Tripoli and laid its hands on two fighter planes. They added that the group threatened not only Tunisia, the country bordering Libya, but all the states in the Maghreb region.

More recently, a tweet dated August 25, 2014 announced the death of the American actor Sylvester Stallone. Picked up by the site microblogging, the rumour immediately generated a media storm across the planet, before the relatives of the actor dispelled it. This all unfolded in one single day.

Rumours do not only grow through social networks or what is known as the mass media (television, radio, the written press). They can also thrive during informal meetings, salons or receptions. These are favourable places for the exchange and transmission of rumours and news stories, for which a degree of truth is often left to be desired. In this narrow and limited world, to which can be added, offices, refreshment areas and cafeterias, millions of small stories are relayed, scenarios sweetened and stories amplified. 'Multiple mini-rumours that remain confined to the restricted circles



of family, the workplace, the local area, the village, run shamelessly. We all bathe in a permanent "ear to mouth" syndrome, which certain people are particularly partial to. No social circle or profession escapes it, not political and intellectual circles, and not even news professionals. Where uncertainty and competition reign, the mechanism of "it is said" is ready to function.<sup>1</sup>

A story, a script, some catchphrases, actors and a coherent narrative construction, such are the elements that actively contribute to the amplification of rumours. 'Amplification falls under the psychological tendency to "top up," in other words "add" into the rumour mill a small dose of overstatement, that acceptable part of a lie that lifts oneself a little above the rest.'<sup>2</sup>

One of the major challenges that confront us today is the value of information. To ensure that rumour does not take the upper hand in a world where access to data has come within the reach of the many, the contribution of news professionals, whose mission is to cross-check and verify information, is a necessity. The mainstream media outlets – press agencies, newspapers, twenty-four hour news channels, radio stations etc, are called upon to fully play their part because all balanced, verified and cross-checked information has a price. As such, mainstream news providers must firstly – and as a matter of urgency – be independent, and above all possess adequate material and human resources.

1. Bernard Paillard : L'écho de la rumeur, in Communication, n°52, 1990  
2. B. Paillard, op.cit.

\*Translated from the French by Sarah Morris