THE MECHANISMS OF FORMATION
AND SPREADING OF RUMORS

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Rumors arise most often due to a vacuum of information, lack of credibility and relevance of the official information. Rumors always accompany periods of political crisis, economic or social tension and tightness in domestic or international life.

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Rumor can be defined as an information on a product or event about to happen, that suppose to be authentic and also a novelty, but often with an ambiguous and biased, unverified or difficult to verify in a real time features, which is spread in the absence, in the parallel and often in the opposite of informations provided by official means.

From this definition emerges the characteristics of rumor:
- the information character;
- the unofficial character;
- the reference to an important event;
- the novelty;
- the ambiguity;
- the mixture of truth and falsehood, (the first leading to the acceptance and the second, giving credibility to the rumor);
- the contents-linking with hopes, expectations, fears of individuals or communities to whom they are addressed.

As a specific form of communication, especially an interpersonal one, the rumor is based on some mechanisms and general human characteristics: curiosity, desire for people to pass in front of others as well informed by exceeding official information, imagination and anticipation capacity, the human predisposition to amplify the news by personal comments and opinions, the natural reaction to pass forward the information.

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There is a selective sensitivity for the content of rumors in each individual, that depends on the personal attitudes and beliefs and also on own life experience, or in other words, nobody is more „deaf" than the one who does not want to hear.

The labile, anxious persons, which have some inferiority complexes, are considered to be perfect relays for transmitting rumors[1]. There are also some opinions[2] which consider that the women would be more likely to accept the rumors and willingly transmitting them. It starts from the idea that „ the gossip" is more related to the womanish habit. The intellectuals are themselves a special audience for rumors. They know that sometimes the truth is not preferred by officials. But on the other hand, their specialization in some specific field, turns them into a part of the general public in the matter of receiving information from other areas that, for a correct understanding, require an other kind of expertise.

That is why, the status of intellectuals and their circle of relationships are factors that make them, in some cases, suitable persons for accepting the messages behind the rumors.

„There rumors exist not because their sources exist, but because the people spread them[3]". They are perishable and they have value only as long as they are actual. Over time, they lose their significance, therefore they should be transmitted as quickly as possible.

Rumor has a pragmatic purpose. Usually it is related to events and situations that interest some large groups of people or guides the activity of their group members. That's why when we hear some news, even if we are not sure that they are real, our first reaction is to repeat them to those who may be interested. And so, the discussion quickly slips to the consequences, to the implications posed by the situation described and to possible ways to solve the eventual problems. When the danger is imminent, and the decision is absolutely necessary, we cannot waste time checking the information, because the risk is too big. If it proves to be just a false alarm, even better, if it is true, then we have a clear conscience that we have done our job.

Many rumors are spreading rapidly precisely because they are funny and surprising. They are subjects of discussion and ensure the success of propagation. If the message is received from an unreliable source, the confirmation that is coming from other group members give it more credibility. To know whether the information is true or false, we have to appeal to the reference group opinion. When it refers to a worrying fact, the collective assumption of the danger associated with the fact described by, takes us out of isolation and makes us feel better.

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[1] S. Chelcea, *A century of psycho-sociology*, I.N.I. Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 56.
[2] *Ibidem*.
[3] G. Durandin, *L`information, la désinformation et la réalité*, P.U.F., 1993, Paris, p. 17.

Rumor dissemination speed is determined by:
- group structure, the degree of homogeneity and spatial arrangement;
- spatial cohesion and community interests;
- importance of the topic, the correlation between message content and individual and group motivation. The larger is the interest for the subject in the group, the greater are the chances that rumor to be spread faster and on a wider area.

For pervasive rumors, when the action itself is deliberate it is used the field agents who take advantage of the rallies, the demonstrations, the lines at department stores, etc. In this way, the rumors reach a lot of people, many of them transmit to others, this way they turn into the broadcasters - relay transmission.

The dissemination speed is greatly increased when rumors use the media. Radio and television transmission events are now live possible. Also the internet has an important role in spreading rumors. Thus, by these means millions of people can see the same information simultaneously, regardless of national borders or language. But by increasing the public, increase the possibility that what is false, easy to be found, and also the danger that the distortion of the initial message to be bigger.

Not always a rumor is based on fact. Sometimes it is pure imagination, the effect of a creative process. Also, in an ambiguous situation, in the absence of accurate official informations, the members of a interested group are trying to substitute them and so, to discharge themselves of the stress generated by doubts and uncertainty.

In everyday life, the individual is transmitting an information not because he is forced to do it, but because he or the group he belongs to, feels involved in the on–going event. In this case, the individual is interested to be believed by the other people and he is trying to convince him by adding some details he knows, or he has heard them from other sources, and this way the message is reshaped; that leads to an opposite effect to reduction - the process so-called „snowball"- each link adding some new details.

The rumor is attributed to reliable sources (ie the authorities) or it is made as a product to the group consensus. Names or numbers are most frequently modified, either because they are difficult to remember and that is why they cause confusion, or they are not representative (in the moments of high stress, self-critical capacity of individuals is decreasing while the emotional involvement is increasing and so, nothing is too exaggerated to be thought).

Sometimes occurs reversed polarity - especially in the situations when by rumors, are transmitted an information that it is in contradiction with the personal opinions of individuals. It is difficult to believe for example, that a person, despised by members of a group, has committed a positive fact

(a criminal could save human life). Another possibility would be to ignore an information for the reason of not being worthy to be taken into account.

Usually, rumor tends to update everything. An information relating to a past event, is not important any longer. That is why, the rumor must refers to the actual events. And so, a person acts from the past, are now transferred to the present.

There are some cases when the rumor stores carefully the original message without being reshaped during dissemination. In these cases, the messages are short, easy to remember, and respond to peoples expectations, prejudices and attitudes.

In the practice of misinformation, rumor has a special place. The military conflicts of the last decade, have shown the concern of countries to organize and train since peacetime, specialized organs (including political scientist, sociologists, psychologists, linguists) to „build" rumors which offer mystified explanations of some facts, but with a high degree of credibility in order to influence public opinion and enemy forces.

A source made from specialists can cause a real crisis, based on rumors well directed and launched at moments of great impact. „Rumors can create creative predicting events when they are used as instruments of propaganda and misinformation"[4]. The whole operation is based on a well-known proverb, namely that „there is no smoke without fire". The misinformers are interested in spreading a rumor, based on its inner mechanism to respond to the individual desire to disseminate the brand-new, hot, just received information.

By the rumor are spread ideas, reports, statements or assumptions that may be false or containing some elements entirely true but distorted, related to the real situation and to the of interest important groups. In this regard, the forged message is nothing but the mean by which it seeks that target-soldiers to act in the direction desired by the enemy.

It misinforms less to convince, but rather to lead to a goal that is usually hidden. By breaking any moral and ethical rule or principle, the architects of rumors claim that, even only a simple sieving of doubt in the minds of soldiers represents a major success.

The premises of rumor are in the fact that individuals are willing to learn more about a subject, to understand it, but they did not get or have no access to official information.

Misinformation gives rise to the phenomenon so-called „situational fog" by which the people uninformed or poorly informed through official channels can be manipulated. The first condition for the existence of this

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[4] R. K. Merton, *Elements de théorie et méthode sociologique*, Paris, H. Mendros, 1965, p. 224.

phenomenon is the intention of the source to produces changes in the attitude of individuals, in order to achieve a desired behavior related to a specific event. The second condition is to generate a certain ambiguity by disseminating confused information which leads to a misinterpretation of the reality and *b*y consequence, to a false self-projecting to the facts.

Rumor dissemination is the main way used in disinformation, an easy way to act, primarily because the source of the rumor is rarely the subject of a methodical action of search and identification. The misinformer can thus launch false deformed news without the risk of being responsible.

Rumor can be easily disseminated by influent agents or simply by sympathizers. „The rumor did not leave written streaks and disseminated information may go a long way, from one author to another, from one source to another, in order to be attributed to someone [5]".

The dissemination is dependent of the community circumstance in which they are spread into: the credibility of social institutions, the organization system and the flow of formal information, the quality and reliability of official information, the types of power relationship in the society and the traits of personality of the individuals and their needs. All these features are only some of the factors that have to be taken into account by misinformer in order to sets his strategy through rumors.

Perhaps the most important issue of the misinformer is about the power of persuasion, the efficiency of rumor spread, in order to determine the expected behaviors. Gustav Le Bon defined[6] the existence of four main factors which he presented as a kind of „grammar of persuasion":

1. the prestige source, which suggest and commands respect;

2. the unsupported statement that eliminates discussion and creating the impression of thorough documentation of the person who represents the source of messages;

3. the distribution, which made to be accepted as certain, a statement compatible with the objectives of the source;

4. the mental influence that strengthens the early individual beliefs.

In case of the rumor, its credibility, its power of persuasion is depend on many factors with different weights in rumor efficiency. The researches that have been made on this topic, highlighted a number of factors such as: source credibility, plausibility of the disseminated message, his origin from many different sources seemingly disinterested, the power of repetition of rumor during its increment, becoming stronger and stronger etc.

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[5] G. Durandin, *L`information, la désinformation et la réalité*, P.U.F., Paris, 1993, p. 42.
[6] G. Le Bon, *Opinions and beliefs*, Science Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, pp. 132-133.

Whether or not the rumor has these credibility features, he must not omit an essential condition: the desire to believe from those who receives it. The rumor primarily is defined as a piece of information that we want to believe it. „If the information does not satisfy any desire, does not represent a latent human concerns, does not serves as a valve for any psychological conflict, the rumor will not spread[7]".

Launching rumors is not made randomly, but taking into account the human groups expectations related to the existing problematic situation. Based on these situational data, the misinformer is launching a message related of people expectations, no matter how far from the truth that statement is. Rumor dynamics is independent of his authentication issues. The process is launched only when certain people trust an information and considers it very important to spread it in his entourage.

The media can not only serve as a means of processing and dissemination of rumors circulating at some time, but may even contribute to their success by slipping facts which until that time have gone unnoticed and by providing some assumptions that may catch on. Even the rumor denial can be a way for it to be better distributed: instead to lead to extinction of the rumor, the denial can create a boomerang effect by increasing the dissemination to those who did not know about it. In this sense we can say that denying a false information, means to provide a new and free advertising to it.

Rumors manage to conquer a big space in social area, particularly in crisis situations when the rumors actually amplify it. Rumors always accompany periods of political crisis, economic or social tension and tightness in domestic or international life, when peoples face with situations beyond their power of understanding and the information needed to adjust their behaviors are either insufficient or inadequate. It goes without saying that the rumors are spread, in so-considered favorable environments, by those who want to misinform, and their dissemination is made towards several targets at once, so the appearance of multiple sources of rumors leads to the increase of their credibility.

As a conclusion, the rumor dissemination as the main way to achieve misinformation, also constitutes a specific form of waging an unconventional war. It takes place at the level of the mental processes, disordering them and altering their „product" generating a catastrophic finality on the human way of thinking and behaving. In the conflicts that occur today is increasingly tended to use the disinformation, the propaganda, the disunity, the intoxication, the intimidation or the psychological isolation.

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[7] J.N. Kapferer, *The rumors*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p. 123.

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