

# Rumour Theory and Problem Theory

*Michel-Louis Rouquette*

To associate the theory of rumour with the theory of problems may seem incongruous. And yet a rumour may easily be perceived as a solution, one that is quite circumstantial and wholly marked by mental improvisation, to a problem of collective relevance: to explain, for example, why one is right to be worried, to account for whatever reason one might have for showing hostility to an innovation, to show what face we should put on our uncertainties, to argue the distance which separates us from others unlike us and to prove, by this example, how hateful are our oppressors and those who exploit us. But there is more. Explicitly or otherwise, rumour ends up generating practical advice, an injunction to action or to refrain from action ('don't do this', 'don't go there', 'don't eat that', 'watch out', 'check up on that . . .) which also links it to a concrete solution. Which goes to suggest that, antecedent to the rumour, there existed a need to know or to know how.

Such a way of looking at things (Rouquette, 1989) presents several advantages. First of all it permits an advance in parsimony, since, by very definition, there must exist fewer originating 'problems' than attested 'solutions'. On the other hand, this point of view installs rumour in the function of a revelation or symptom of a social state which encompasses it and, one might say, motivates it; the anecdotal tale, once one can re-establish its link with the problem raised, comes to signify something besides itself. Finally, this perspective reconnects the production and development of rumours to the set of cognitive mechanisms of the computational type. One rediscovers therein the continuity of processes of social thought, and rumours cease to be confined to their status of monstrous singularities.

## Parsimony

Having been the object of sustained attention during the period 1950–75, problem theory is today languishing in relative stagnation. A certain disappointment in the unrealized ambitions of artificial intelligence,<sup>1</sup> together with the extreme difficulty of

Copyright © ICPHS 2007

SAGE: London, Los Angeles, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192107075289

the subject, has contributed to re-orienting research along more descriptive and in a sense more 'naturalist' paths, more generally inspired by the neurosciences than by general epistemology. There is now less interest in the modelling of tasks than in the detailed characterization of the way organisms, whether human or not, process information. There remains, however, one issue that has still not been transcended, one fundamental distinction which was presented by Minsky and which has been many times debated or sharpened up by specialists (cf. for example Reitman, 1964; Rouquette, 1973; Simon, 1973): the distinction between problems that are 'well-' and 'ill-'defined.

There exist several equivalent ways of formulating this conceptual opposition. One of the simplest is the following: a problem is reckoned to be ill-defined when one can apply to any proposed solution an indeterminate plurality of evaluative criteria, to the exclusion of the binary criterion of 'true' or 'false'. One might consequently say, for example, that the solution proposed is, to a greater or lesser degree, realist, satisfying, clever, attractive, advantageous, economical, innovative, and so on. But it would not amount to a demonstration of necessity in the logical sense of the term. The choice of a holiday or travel destination provides a familiar illustration of this type of decision that foreshadows action.

We are speaking here of problems that are *by nature* ill-defined and not of problems which may be temporarily ill-defined because of continuing uncertainty over how they should be correctly defined.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that nearly all practical questions (those relating to education, work, love, politics, death) lend themselves only to evaluations involving multiple criteria and which can never be fixed by self-evident demonstration. The supposed 'problem' to which any given rumour relates after its own fashion is obviously of this sort. It allows an indeterminate number of 'solutions' of which none may be considered as absolute and definitive.

One particularly interesting consequence of this conception is that the prospect of a typology then becomes possible. Indeed, insofar as it constitutes a 'solution', a particular rumour may appear as the manifestation of an instance, capable of figuring with certain others (their number is of little significance) in one and the same class. And this class is made up of those responses which are admissible, or at least of the responses effectively proposed, for a particular type of problem. This type may be described as a set of more or less constraining socio-cognitive demands which must be satisfied in order to maintain, or to re-establish, the stability of the practical world. A very simple analogy allows us easily to understand the import of this reduction to a type. Let's suppose that ideas were being sought for ways of eliminating or dealing with a certain category of urban waste. On the face of it, the various proposals put forward will be differently marked, depending on the individual or groups they represent, by criteria that are economic, ecological, aesthetic, technical, political, etc. These 'solutions' may even be mutually contradictory, or at the very least be mutually exclusive or inhibitory, as is often obvious in partisan debate. But they will all be encompassed within a single framework, bounded at one end by the same initial proposition (the existence of the waste in question), and at the other by the same terminal outcome (the disappearance or treatment of the said waste). More precisely, sociologically speaking, one might properly say: on the one hand there is the recognition, validated by the community considered as 'conscientization', of the existence

of these waste-products; and on the other, there is the consensual validation of their removal or their treatment.

The numerous examples of urban legends noted in the Northern Hemisphere (see in particular Campion-Vincent and Renard, 1992, 2002; Carbone, 1990) perfectly illustrate this phenomenon of instance formulation or of derivation out of a limited number of interwoven threads and of a limited number of attitudes. Beyond their apparent diversity, the rumours and stories linked to the theft of organs, for example, lay bare the ambiguity of the relationships of a large number of people with the world of medicine and the uneasiness created by the way that world has of incarnating, in the true sense of the term, its power over the most ignorant and deprived sectors of the community (cf. Campion-Vincent, 2002). We are not dealing here with an anarchic burst of deluded imaginings or anecdotes, but with a homogeneous class of products governed by a single set of awarenesses and habits. It is effectively a social landscape, manifesting, so to speak, a cognitive horizon, which is revealed in this way.

### **Symptom**

Understanding how a rumour is generated means analysing the specific circumstances of its authors'-propagators within a social grouping. These circumstances can be grouped under three complementary aspects: a particular profile of the content of information known and the means by which this knowledge was gained; a register of the communication processes which prove effective (most particularly in terms of 'addresses' or of communication networks); and finally an inventory of modes of social interaction, both internal to a group (interpersonal relations within groups with a common affiliation) as well as external (real or imaginary relationships with other groups).

Saying that these three aspects are complementary means first of all that each aspect necessarily interrelates with the two others. Communication is at once an effect and an agent of social interaction, in the same way that casually picked-up knowledge is socially marked and is expressed, honed or elaborated by means of communicative processes which constitute the very basis of the affiliation networks and structures of belonging. Thus, under whatever of these three perspectives one treats rumours, it is always the same object being dealt with. This rumour-object, in a sense, carries within it as much social capital as it does cognitive capital, and as much cognition as communication. But this principle of complementarity carries also the corollary that if each one of these aspects is necessary, none is by itself sufficient for the analysis. The strange curiosity about rumour (how could otherwise reasonable individuals believe in such claptrap?), highly disconcerting as a conundrum, is resolved when one takes into account at the same time the prevailing conditions of social interaction both within the group and towards the outside, the regular or occasional processes by which communication passes within and from it, and the rules by which items of common knowledge become validated.

What an emergent rumour points to is the concomitant existence of an ill-defined problem which is more or less clearly perceived by the members of the community

associated with it. Even if we are to apply the term in a very broad sense, we are not of course referring here to just any kind of 'problem'. The particular sort involved always presents certain properties whose details can usefully be considered here.

In this regard we may start from the well-established correlation between rumour and states of crisis. That rumours are about at all times there is no doubt. But it is equally true that crisis situations (natural catastrophes, epidemics, wars, revolutions . . .) provoke a proliferation of hearsay and sensational reports which extend far beyond the normal level of occurrence and the ordinary intensity of passed-on information. If the crisis does not, properly speaking, itself create the rumours, it nevertheless accelerates or facilitates them. One may in consequence wonder on which type of problem or which problem-related aspects a crisis is likely to have effects which are translated by this proliferation of 'solutions' expressed in rumour form.

The answer is relatively simple. Given that the crisis, by definition, involves a breakdown or a suspension of procedures, the 'problems' subsequently posed or accentuated are all linked, whether closely or from a distance, with the notion of *control*; control of nature, of circumstance, of human systems, of institutions and behaviour. Sometimes descriptive sometimes explanatory of that which is posing the threat, deviating from the norm, going from bad to worse or escaping from control, the rumour emerges in a semi-public space oriented by the implicit memory of the relationships existing within society and organized according to the economy of practical knowledge.

Two important characteristics derive immediately from this: one is epistemic and the other, to coin a term, is agonistic.

From the epistemic point of view, rumour is governed by an axiomatic of exemplarity which may be set out in the following way:

- (a) what has happened to one may happen to all (individuality is eclipsed by uniformity);
- (b) a single reported case constitutes a sufficient proof of possibility;
- (c) possibility conceals probability.

This concept of control possesses its own internal rigour. Demanding, and in a certain sense totalitarian, it leaves no place for uncertainty. As a consequence, it can present as particularly efficient, protective and solicitous at the same time as it strongly draws into itself those persons who share it. The message speaks to them indeed not of theory or principles, but of themselves. It is from all these interrelated reasons that rumour draws its strength of popular conviction.

From the relational point of view, the notion of control has a direct application in the categorization and evaluation of inter-group links. The segmentation of the social fabric, which constitutes the necessary substrate for the emergence of a sense of group-belonging, is typically manifest in the expression of tensions, even of declared conflicts, between groups occupying different social positions. 'We' are not like 'them', our values clash, our interests are in opposition. At the heart of this segmentation can always be found power-based relationships. On the one side, sector by sector, the decision-makers, the givers of orders, the organizers, the bearers of knowledge, those capable of action – in short, those who possess to at least some

degree a publicly recognized capacity for control over the behaviour of others. On the other side, precisely those who submit to dominance, who obey, who carry out orders, who are dependent, who look for support. Those of this latter group, of necessity the more numerous, constantly develop manifold varieties of what are sometimes called 'conspiracy theories' or 'plot theories' (cf. Campion-Vincent's recent 2005 work). These simplistic theories, which are typical of social thought-processes, both express and nurture a deep-seated distrust with regard to any kind of authority. Power structures are in effect conceived of (or, if preferred, perceived, for there is certainly an element of actual experience at the basis of such an attitude) as having as their accompanying function the manipulation, misleading and deception, for the benefit of those who wield the power, of all those who are just 'normal citizens', the run-of-the-mill populace, the 'soldiers in the ranks', the ordinary users. There is no control process, so the thought goes, without accompanying duplicity. So this is naturally what rumours bring out when they claim to be finally whispering the truth, bringing to light what would otherwise have remained hidden, making public things that by their nature were intended to remain confidential. Between the clandestine and the discreet, the coarse and the sophisticated, the counter-power of uncontrolled speech defends and illustrates a supposedly inalienable space of freedom, which is not the least of the attractions of rumour narratives, over and beyond their particular content.

### Calculating trajectories

Such narratives are notoriously unstable. As the rumour is progressively relayed, one aspect of the story may be withdrawn, another added, a side-incident may be invented, or persons involved, outcomes or places may be shifted around. But such changes are not the more-or-less haphazard effects of limited intellectual skills or circumstantial distractions. On the contrary, the development of a rumour is in general the progressive actualization of an idea. Far from witnessing the erratic meanderings of a fortuitous story, one observes the developing expression of a commonly held certitude that becomes progressively better motivated and more attentive to detail as it goes on.

Let's consider several of the mechanisms by which a rumour becomes transformed and paradoxically gains in authenticity what it loses in fidelity.

Take for example the tendency to exaggerate characteristics, acts or intentions: a stray dog suddenly turns into 'a monstrous beast', a brawl quickly degenerates into a 'pitched battle', a cluster of people becomes a 'mob', the expression of a discord gets distorted into an 'explosion of hate'. In congruence with conspiracy theory, the number of victims is always superior to what has been officially announced, the hazards presented by a substance or a place are always more considerable than they are declared to be, and so on. This 'inflation principle' has the effect of dragging the story out of the realm of the trivial and thus serves to preserve its value as a measure of the social bond: what circulates among us must necessarily *be worth the trouble*, that is, be of a value which highlights the worth of our relationship itself. So it is not a matter of 'objectively' passing on a piece of news dressed up in the plain

guarantees of a sworn statement (which would really not be a problem), it is a question of lending added weight, as suitable, to aspects likely to guarantee mutual recognition. The communication provides at once the opportunity, the framework and the need. Brauer, Judd and Gliner (1995) have shown experimentally that the repeated expression of an attitude contributed to the polarization (that is, the extreme exaggeration) of this attitude, with this outcome being even more marked when there is effective interaction between the providers and the recipients.

Another very common mechanism present in the adaptive transmission of rumours is the one of bringing about an ever-increasing conformity between the story being circulated and the normal living conditions and practical experience of those to whom it is directed: the geographical setting should be not too remote; those involved should preferably share a close social proximity with the rumour's audience; the scenes described should encompass familiar sights; the feelings or emotions expressed, and the motives and impulses for the actions should not be such as to surprise. The fluctuating adaptations of the story that tend towards bringing this into line with such an ideal of appropriateness correspond in similar degree to forms of *assimilation* in the sense used by Allport and Postman. They could equally be interpreted as phenomena or more precisely as processes which effect the *anchoring* of the rumour, which studies of social representation have discussed: turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, interpreting the new in terms of the old so that it may be appropriated (cf. Moscovici, 1961), bringing close to home that which is remote, 'civilizing' that which is unruly, personalizing the abstract. As may be seen, it is not the effect of an insufficiency of information which purportedly leads into having to make do with gross approximations or immoderate metaphor; on the contrary, this 'tendency to conformity' constitutes of itself one of the regulating processes which will allow a rumour to be propagated within its own specific milieu, that is, in effect, to come to full fruition. In the same way the solution to an ill-defined problem is not seen as admissible unless it is compatible with the values, interests and capacity to act of the group to which it is addressed.

Thus, rumours are clearly inscribed, along with other social phenomena, within the overall framework of social thought-processes. In view of this, they do not arise from some kind of pathological disjuncture, but on the other hand from a fine-tuned process of adjustment which aligns the expression of what is known or believed with the tiniest shifts in the social relations dynamic. We pick up here, as far as the products of collective activity are concerned, with one of the most functional senses of the notion of *creativity* (Rouquette, 1995). The creative process is often assimilated to a disorderly ferment which upsets the norms and apparently escapes from local constraints, whereas most of the time it is part of processes and practices which are perfectly embedded within a field of cognitive, communicational and social determinations. Creativity is in fact highly normal, there are even professions built around it, organized markets for it, institutes dedicated to supporting and preparing for it. Just as any 'creation' has a cultural upstream (which naturally includes technical resources, canonical forms, collective memory) and concomitant structures of social recognition (whether immediate or subsequent), so rumour is not some burst of fantasy circulating through serendipitous encounter within a jumble of prejudices, obsessions and broken-up bits of information. To restore to rumour its particular

rationality clearly is neither to exalt it or absolve it, but rather to emphasize its insertion within 'normal' social interaction and its place within the continuum of habitual forms of shared knowledge.

Michel-Louis Rouquette  
*Université Paris Descartes*

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

### Notes

1. These ambitions were set out for example in the manifesto volume of Schank and Childers (1984).
2. It seems that this latter case is in the end the only one envisaged by Simon (1973) in his discussion of Minsky's criterion: solving a problem consists of passing it by progressive stages from an initial very ill-defined state to a terminal state that is thoroughly defined out of the constraints imposed by environment and action. Admittedly this is much more the point of view of an engineer, focused upon the 'sciences of conception' than of a theoretician. And this point of view is the diametric opposite of the *a priorism* of Karl Popper: 'We learn *only* by trial and error. But our trials are always our hypotheses. They emerge from us and not from the outside world. From this latter we learn only that some of our trials are errors.' (Popper, quoted from the French translation of *All Life is Problem-solving*, 1997: 142).

### References

- Brauer, M., Judd, C. M. and Gliner, M. D. (1995) 'The Effects of Repeated Expressions on Attitude Polarization during Group Discussions', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68(6): 1014–29.
- Campion-Vincent, V. (2002) 'Organ Theft Narratives as Medical and Social Critique', *Journal of Folklore Research* 39(1): 33–50.
- Campion-Vincent, V. (2005) *La société parano. Théories du complot, menaces et incertitudes* [The Paranoid Society: Conspiracy Theories, Threats and Uncertainties]. Paris: Payot.
- Campion-Vincent, V. and Renard, J.-B. (1992) *Légendes urbaines* [Urban Legends]. Paris: Payot.
- Campion-Vincent, V. and Renard, J.-B. (2002) *De source sûre. Nouvelles rumeurs d'aujourd'hui* [From Trusty Sources: New Rumours of Today]. Paris: Payot.
- Carbone, M. T. (1990) *99 legende urbane* [99 Urban Legends]. Milan: Mondadori.
- Moscovici, S. (1961) *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* [Psychoanalysis, Its Image and Public]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Popper, K. (1997) *All Life is Problem-Solving*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Reitman, W. R. (1964) 'Heuristic Decision Procedures, Open Constraints, and the Structure of Ill-defined Problems', in M. W. Shelly and G. L. Bryan (eds), *Human Judgments and Optimality*, pp. 282–315. New York: Wiley.
- Rouquette, M. L. (1973) 'L'analyse des problèmes mal définis' [Analysis of ill-defined problems], in *Cahiers de psychologie* 16: 3–10.
- Rouquette, M. L. (1989) 'La rumeur comme résolution d'un problème mal défini' [Rumour as solution to an ill-defined problem], *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* LXXXVI: 117–22.
- Rouquette, M. L. (1995) *La Créativité* [Creativity], 5th edn. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Schank, R. C. and Childers, P. (1984) *The Cognitive Computer: On Language, Learning and Artificial Intelligence*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Simon, H. A. (1973) 'The Structure of Ill-Structured Problems', *Artificial Intelligence* 4: 181–201.