

“Loose Lips Sink Ships”:
A History of Rumor Control in the United States

by
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Abstract

LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS: A HISTORY OF RUMOR CONTROL IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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Throughout its history, rumor control has been comprised of efforts to monitor, suppress and/or spread messages which travel through word of mouth communication. Fundamentally, rumor control is a form of propaganda, often used in concert with other techniques aimed at influencing attitudes and behavior. Organized rumor control emerged during World War II, when the FDR administration viewed rumors as a threat to social stability and war morale. As a result, in 1942 the Office of War Information recruited barbers, librarians, school teachers and other civilians to submit rumors they overheard to the government for analysis. These efforts coincided with poster campaigns warning people not to talk about the war. After the war, the CIA funded extensive rumor research to learn about the flow of word of mouth communication, including experiments in which thousands of leaflets were dropped on unsuspecting American towns. During the civil unrest in the 1960's, dozens of "rumor control centers" were established ostensibly to help control violence, but mainly functioned to provide information to police and reassure white citizens. During the same period, J.

Edgar Hoover's FBI spread false rumors to destabilize Black political groups. Corporate advertisers turned to marketing techniques that drew upon rumor control principles in the 1990's as a result in the perceived decline in mass advertising. Indeed, contemporary public relations can be seen as a form of rumor control, given its focus on suppressing negative word of mouth and promoting the spread of positive messages from person to person. Using primary historical data and interviews, the dissertation reveals that the themes of power, surveillance and social control are evident throughout rumor control history, and sheds light on why and how our attitudes are monitored and shaped by corporations and the government.

Foreword

In January 2007, I was developing a dissertation proposal about the history of rumor control in the United States. At the Library of Congress, I had recently discovered a substantial archive relating to government rumor control efforts during World War II, and after finding out that that this material had barely been studied, I thought that I may have a good dissertation topic on my hands. Given my interest in the relationship between communication and power, the idea that a government would expend effort studying what people were saying to one another during wartime was very intriguing to me. At about this time, I learned that rumor control centers had been established during the race-related violence of the 1960s. I thought that if I studied these two, separate efforts, I may find parallels that would be revealing about the nature of surveillance, power and social control.

While I was studying for my PhD, I had a job which arguably made me a practitioner of social control myself. At the time, I was an executive at a large communications services company based in New York, leading communications research for my client, one of the largest advertisers in the world. Part of my role was working with my colleagues to develop research and strategic points of view (“POV”s) that could be released to the press and help gain publicity for our company. In early 2007, we had decided to latch on to what was a very hot topic in the marketing industry at the time: word of mouth marketing.

This dissertation describes in considerable detail what the term “word of mouth marketing” means. But, for now, suffice to say that the term implies tracking and trying to influence what people to say to one another, with the goal of selling products and promoting a positive corporate image. As part of my work on the team that was preparing our POV, I decided to interview a number of companies who tracked, analyzed and reported what people wrote and posted on the Internet. I thought that perhaps we could do a pilot research project for one of our clients and release the results to the public.

I met with several companies over the course of a few weeks. Usually I met with the company’s CEO and head of sales, and heard their standard sales presentation introducing the company. Over the course of these meetings, I was surprised to hear a recurring theme: that in addition for working for corporate advertisers, the companies also had contracts with military and law enforcement agencies. One CEO told me that his clients included the Air Force Intelligence Agency and the Joint Warfare Analysis Center. Another mentioned that initial funding for his company came from the CIA. A third boasted of work for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. One company told me that their software had been developed by the FBI.

At first, I found it curious that conversation-tracking companies would do the same work for both corporations, who sell things like soap and beer, and the government agencies charged with the national defense and law enforcement.

But after some reflection I realized that in many ways, their tracking of word of mouth reflected a shared goal. Surely, law enforcement and intelligence agencies sought ways to identify communication that may signal threatening activity. But I sensed there was something else, an additional factor, at work. Both the government and corporations spend billions of dollars every year trying to shape public attitudes. Both try to promote certain attitudes in support of their institutional goals, whether it is selling cars or selling wars, and have a vested interest in closely monitoring public opinion. Simply put, both are reliant on tools of propaganda and surveillance.

I began to see parallels between contemporary word of mouth marketing and the historical data I was gathering for the dissertation. I knew that in World War II, the government had tried to collect information about what people were saying to one another because it was concerned that rumors would depress support for the war. The word of mouth tracking companies could be, it seemed, engaged in basically the same business for corporate advertisers—closely monitoring public opinion to ensure alignment with a certain point of view. I knew that during the 1960s, the FBI had spread rumors to discredit Black leaders and disrupt their organizations, and that corporations today were increasingly focused on getting people to pass their messages on for them. Sensing that there would be theoretical, practical and historical links among World War II, 1960s, and contemporary rumor control, I decided to construct a history of rumor control that linked these three. The result is this dissertation.

While I believe that this dissertation merits the subtitle I gave it (“A History of Rumor Control in the United States”), it is not comprehensive. First of all, the history begins in World War II. Activity related to rumor control occurred before then. For example, the work of the “Four Minute Men,” who were arguably a group of rumor-spreaders directed by the Committee for Public Information during World War I, could be part of a more inclusive history. It is quite possible that the America Protective League, a deputized force of government investigators and rabble-rousers who also worked during World War I, may have done some rumor investigations as part of their work.

I also leave out some categories of rumor control. Rumor control in political campaigning, where rumor spreading and suppression are common, is not covered. Indeed, in June 2008, Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee for President, established a rumor-scotching web site called “Fight the Smears,” demonstrating the importance of rumor control to modern political campaigning (Falcone, 2008, June 12). There are also aspects of commercial rumor control that I do not explore, namely rumor management in the entertainment industry, where spreading and suppressing rumors about celebrities is the work of many publicists. I also exclude rumor control within the military, as well as external psychological warfare efforts. Rumor control in disasters and in the financial markets have not been covered either. I may expand this work to include these areas some time in the future. Nonetheless, the dissertation does cover historical episodes of rumor control that I feel are the most salient to understanding of the

way communication is used as a way of perpetuating government and corporate power.

Admittedly, however, some areas that I do cover deserve more in-depth treatment. In particular, J. Edgar Hoover used rumors to destroy individuals and groups associated with the Black Power movement in the 1960s. This is a rich vein for inquiry, but due to resource and time restraints I did not explore this in great detail. The Black press, which was a major source of resistance to endemic racism during World War II, and a counterpoint to the Government's propaganda efforts, is an important and highly relevant topic as well. I discuss this briefly in Chapter 2, but it deserves more elaboration.

The dissertation also has limitations in perspective. The data I use in the dissertation comes mainly from the people and institutions conducting rumor control: Roosevelt's Office of War Information during World War II, state and municipal rumor control centers during the 1960s, and documents and interviews from public relations practitioners today. It is thus a history of rumor control from the perspective of the manipulators, not the manipulated, and without a doubt reflects my own experiences and biases as a member of what Stuart Ewen has called "the compliance industry." In some cases, particularly during the "race riots" of the 1960s, this perspective is problematic and limiting. I have tried to be cognizant of the way that the constructs and assumptions of the powerful affect my analysis of each historical episode that I cover, and I do believe that it is useful to study the powerful from their perspective. At the same

time, I am aware that this is a privileged perspective and there are many other important ones.

If this work is expanded subsequent to the publication of the dissertation, I will seek to address some of the gaps that I have identified here.

Acknowledgments

Over the course of the seven years of pursuing my doctorate degree and producing this dissertation, I have received help, support and inspiration from many people.

I would like to thank my supervisors and management at the companies I have worked at over this period for their support and flexibility in allowing me to take classes, conduct research, and take short periods of time off to write drafts of this document—while still working full-time. These people include Nick Nyhan at Dynamic Logic, Marla Kaplowitz at MediaVest, and Yasmin Namini and Murray Gaylord at The New York Times. These people have made it possible for me to balance a business career with the demands of graduate school.

Choosing to pursue my degree at the CUNY Graduate Center was a great decision. I am indebted to many of the faculty and staff in the Sociology Department there, including Rati Kashyap and Professor Phil Kasinitz. I am especially grateful to my dissertation committee: William Kornblum, Barbara Katz-Rothman, and in particular my advisor, Stuart Ewen, whose first book has inspired me ever since I read it as an undergraduate. Professor Ewen's intellectual and practical guidance has been indispensable.

I am indebted to many people who helped me piece together the story of rumor control. I would like to thank the librarians who helped me gather data for this project, including William LeFevre at Wayne State University, the librarians at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, James Stack at the University of Washington Libraries, and the InterLibrary loan staff at Mina Rees library at the CUNY Graduate Center. Many of the ideas developed in this project came from the people who have spent time with me to share their knowledge and experience with rumors and rumor control. These people include Prof. Nicholas DiFonzo, Prof. John Ponting, Cathy Faye, Terry Knopf, Brent McGoldrick, Idil Cakim, Jay Gooch, Corrie Tin, Mandy O'Donnell, Jonathan Bernstein, Peter Pitts, Sam Ewen, Glenn Williams and Renee Wilson.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The sociology of knowledge is the study of human perception and the way society shapes it. It strives to uncover not only how knowledge is distributed in society, but how that knowledge is created and how it comes to be perceived as true. One of the field's seminal texts is *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, whose basic premise is that “reality is socially constructed and ... the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs” (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 1). In their book, Berger and Luckman analyze the construction of reality from its most basic linguistic foundations, and provide a detailed framework for how “reality” is established as a shared perception within social systems.

One of the authors' most important concepts is “legitimation,” which they describe as a process which “‘explains’ the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings” (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 93). In other words, legitimation is how socially constructed meaning takes on the appearance of being “real” or “true,” and in the process creates authority for social actors or institutions over this knowledge. Legitimation is important because what is perceived as reality exerts a powerful influence on the how people experience the world. As Berger and Luckman (1967) write:

every institution has a body of transmitted recipe knowledge, that is, knowledge that supplies the institutionally appropriate rules of conduct ... Since this knowledge is socially objectivated as knowledge, that is, as a body of generally valid truths about reality, any radical deviance from the institutional order appears as a departure from reality. Such deviance may be designated as moral depravity, mental disease, or just plain ignorance. (p. 65-66)

Because it shapes such judgments, the ability to legitimate, or define, reality confers power. It can even be seen as a necessary prerequisite to power, since social institutions depend on an underlying ideology to justify their position and actions. As Burkhart Holzner (1972), in his book *Reality Construction in Society*, writes: “Authority always must legitimate itself in the face of potential challenge; there is a necessary and deep connection between authority structures and the nature and structure of ideological systems” (p. 148). In other words, power, authority, and reality construction are socially intertwined.

The way knowledge, belief, and reality are established is not random, and the processes by which they are established are deeply revealing about the way society functions. Since the ability to influence perception of reality is so tightly intertwined with power, understanding the mechanics of legitimation and reality construction are vital to understanding power structures. As Holzner (1972) writes:

There are social patterns in the distribution of doubt and acceptance resulting in channels of communities of communication. These, in turn, influence the way in which members of a society may know reality as much as they represent an important aspect of social structure itself ... There are distinct sociological reasons for the maintenance and for the shift in patterns of knowledge

distribution which are very much in need of investigation. In fact, we suggest that this problem area should become the central concern of an empirically oriented sociology of knowledge which can explore the social distribution and social control of modes of reality construction and of different types of reality constructs. (p. 8-9, 19)

In modern American society, an obvious candidate for an empirical investigation in reality construction is propaganda. Propaganda, the process by which messages are deliberately spread in order to shape attitudes, opinions and behavior, is pervasive. It shapes our way of life, and is fundamental to our cultural, political and economic systems. It is also, generally, a tool of the powerful. In modern American history, propaganda has been used primarily by the government and corporations, two groups that have the influence and resources to spread messages through a largely commercialized media environment. Government propaganda, which can involve the introduction and reification of invented concepts like “the war on terror,” is an obvious example of reality construction. But advertising is also another example of how propaganda legitimates certain views of the world. As George Gerbner (Gerbner, 1996) writes:

Commercials ... present a little vignette about a style of life that says, “This is how things work, this is how things are, and this is a desirable outcome for us to attain (or an undesirable thing that you want to avoid), and therefore you should choose this particular direction, product or service” It is an enormously important cultivation and reinforcement of a framework of life, of what is desirable, of what are the values and choices of what to select, and how to select from them.

Propaganda, such as Presidential speeches and television commercials, usually are distributed through mass communication channels, which allow for dominant

institutions to spread a tightly-constructed story to large numbers of people at once. This can be an effective way of influencing the way people think and feel. But while mass communication can be instrumental in shaping people's perceptions of the world, interpersonal communication can be even more influential. In their book, Berger and Luckman (1967) explain the undeniable "realness" of the interpersonal encounter, and posit that the process of conversation, which requires real-time linguistic cooperation to make it work, is a reality-creating *tour de force*:

The most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation, which is the prototypical case of social interaction ... All other cases are derivatives of it ... In the face-to-face situation the other is fully real. This reality is part of the overall reality of everyday life, and as massive and compelling. (p. 28-29)

Not surprisingly, understanding the power of conversation was part of the earliest theoretical development of modern-day propaganda. Gabriel Tarde, an influential social theorist writing at the end of the 19th century, closely analyzed the role of personal influence in the formation of public opinion. Conversation, Tarde wrote, is "the strongest agent of imitation, of the propagation of sentiments, ideas, and modes of action" (Tarde, 1898, quoted in Clark, 1969, p. 308). Tarde also acknowledged that conversation, because of its influence, could be a check on the power of elites in controlling public opinion. He writes: "Despots are aware of this. Hence they keep a close and wary eye on talk between their subjects and prevent them as much as possible from conversing" (Tarde,

1898, quoted in Clark, 1969, p. 309). In other words, Tarde believed that conversation can act as a counterweight to elite influence over public opinion.

But Tarde, who like many of his contemporaries sought strategies for reinforcing elite control in the face of burgeoning democratic change, recognized that conversation, while dangerous to elites, could also be used to advantage. Tarde believed that newspapers set the boundaries for public thought, and their agenda-setting function could be a powerful check on the disorderly masses. But Tarde felt that the power of newspapers was reliant on conversation, which acted as a message multiplier, spreading propaganda for elite opinion leaders. “If people did not talk ... it would be futile to publish newspapers,” Tarde they would be like a “vibrating string without a sounding board” (Tarde, 1898, quoted in Clark, 1969, p. 58). In this way, Tarde was one of the first to articulate the “two-step flow” theory of communication, which posits that propaganda exerts influence not directly, but only when its message is spread from person to person (Clark, 1969). This theory, as we shall see in Chapter 4, became the central framework for communication research in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The history of rumor control is part of the history of the development of propaganda in the United States, and is a technical and historical analysis of a specific reality construction technique. While rumor control never seems to entirely achieve the ambitions of those using it, the discourse around rumor control is extremely revealing about the concerns, aims and preoccupations of propagandists in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Rumor control is a lens that

allows us to better see the way powerful groups deliberately construct reality and suppress challenges to their message.

Some Definitions

In the course of my research, I have developed definitions of rumor and rumor control that reflect the ideas and discourse of rumor control over the period I studied. The definitions themselves are an important part of the theoretical framework for the subject.

I define a rumor as a piece of information, either true or untrue, that is 1) not legitimized and 2) spreads primarily through word of mouth. Both aspects of the definition are important.

In common parlance, a rumor is a message which is not authorized, verified or official. This means that has not been granted the “cognitive validity” that Berger and Luckman (1967) talk about as the hallmark of legitimized knowledge. For this reason, the concept of rumor itself is situated in knowledge relations, since the ability to grant “cognitive validity” is dependent on (and a source of) social power.

Propaganda itself is the process of legitimizing and reinforcing certain views of reality. Because of this, rumors can be propaganda’s antithesis, because they

carry ideas that are not authorized or legitimated by powerful groups. Therefore, when a rumor is consistent with the legitimized message, in some ways it loses its status of a rumor. This point is best exemplified by an exchange I had with a public relations executive during my research. When I asked him to define a rumor, he said: a “rumor in my mind, by definition, is something that’s usually negative and usually only loosely based in fact but has potential to do significant damage to you know, your own sort of image and/or other people’s perception of you”. When I asked him what he would call an unsubstantiated but *positive* message, he said: “That’s called getting our story out there” (Interviewee 4, personal communication, December 13, 2007). In other words, the essence of the concept of rumor itself is that it is inconsistent with the legitimized message of those vested with the power to shape reality.

Indeed, the word “rumor” is a label can be used to de-legitimize certain points of view. During the civil unrest during the 1960s, authorities, blaming riots on rumors, set up “rumor control centers” to field the telephone calls of nervous citizens. Blaming the riots on rumors de-legitimized claims that the violence was a collective response to institutional racism. In other words, saying that the riots were caused by rumors was a way of calling them baseless. One observer described this very labeling strategy when witnessing the Detroit mayor’s speech in 1968 in which he blamed the riots on rumors and announced the opening of a rumor control center:

The “rumor” label is hence a political term in the Mayor’s lexicon; he is using it to discredit those extremists of whom he speaks, those he is trying so hard to disparage...The [rumor control center] was an attempt to assert control in the name of a set of beliefs spelled out in the TV address. The Mayor was attempting to persuade the citizenry that his assessment of affairs was accurate and trustworthy. This is the meaning of the Rumor Control Center. (Rosenthal, 1979, p. 273)

In this way, “rumor” is a label which simultaneously reinforces a legitimized version of reality and discredits alternative ones.

There are some exceptions to this definition. I found in my research that public relations professionals create and spread stories in order to build positive perceptions of a brand or company. Some feel that this is a kind of rumor-spreading, since they are trying to disseminate stories through word of mouth. These stories, however, while supportive of a brand or company’s goals, usually are not an authorized message, but instead complementary to an authorized message. Because of this, even though rumor control can sometimes entail spreading rumors, the rumors themselves are still non-legitimized messages.

The second characteristic of rumors is that they spread through word of mouth. In the Internet age, this can include interpersonal computer networks like blogs and message boards. The word of mouth aspect of rumors is a fundamental one. A propagandist who can buy or control access to mass communication technology finds it possible to control messages being broadcast about a particular subject, whether it is a new dish soap or war. But controlling what people say to one another about these subjects is much more difficult. Put another way, those with

power and resources can control mass communication, but find it very difficult to control interpersonal communication. Combined with the perceived power of word of mouth, this is one of the key reasons why rumors have been such a source of preoccupation among both the Government and corporations over the 80 years.

Throughout this history, rumor control comprises a number of different kinds of efforts to either 1) *monitor*, 2) *suppress*, or 3) *spread* rumors, and these efforts are often inter-linked. *Monitoring* has been central to all rumor control efforts. These efforts can be passive, as in the case of setting up a rumor call center (during the 1960s), or active, like recruiting barbers and librarians to report hearsay (as during World War II). Rumor *suppression* can range from anti-rumor poster campaigns warning people not to talk, to modern public relations crisis management. Efforts to *spread* rumors range from anonymous letters to political groups about the sexual transgressions of their leaders (as practiced by the FBI during the 1960s), to modern public relations, which uses a form rumor spreading as one of its tactics. Examples of all of these aspects of rumor control—monitoring, suppressing, and spreading—are the part of rumor control history that is detailed in this dissertation.

In sum, rumor control comprises efforts by powerful institutions to assert their power over reality, to de-legitimize and suppress alternative points of view, and to reinforce compliance with the institution's goals. It often works hand in hand with other kinds of propaganda techniques. Because of this, it is a technology of

power that is highly relevant to an understanding of the sociology of knowledge in modern American society.

Methodology

In her article “Historical Sociology in the History of American Sociology,” Mildred Schwartz (1987) traces sociology’s use of the historical method from its early roots in the analysis of social evolution. She suggests that sociology turned away from the historical method under the influence of Parsonian functionalism and the human ecological perspective of the Chicago school partly to distinguish sociology from other disciplines and to “enhance disciplinary institutionalization” (Schwartz, 1987). This cleaved history from sociology for several generations. According to Skocpol, “Until the 1970’s, ‘historical sociology’ was not a phrase often, if ever, heard in conversations among sociologists in the United States” (quoted in Schwartz, 1987).

But in the last 30 years, historical sociology has firmly re-established itself. Indeed, while early sociologists endeavored to establish sociology as a differentiated field, recently sociology has aligned with a range of other disciplines, including history. This process has developed to that extent that Philip Abrams, in his 1983 book, *Historical Sociology*, contends that the methods, theories, and subject matter of history and sociology are indistinguishable (Hewes, 1984). This point of view has also been expressed by Anthony Giddens, who writes in *Central Problems in Social Theory* that “there

simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history—appropriately conceived” (quoted in Gordon, 1998). The idea that history and sociology were indistinguishable was characterized by Goldthorpe in 1991 as a “widely held view” (Goldthorpe, 1991).

Nonetheless, historical sociology and history can differ in some important ways. In his article “The Uses of History in Sociology: Reflections on Some Recent Tendencies,” Goldthorpe argues that while sociology can use historical methods, it can be considered different from history on two counts. First, he argues, sociology should not rely *only* on archival evidence, but should use fieldwork to produce new evidence. Second, while history deals only with the past, Goldthorpe contends that the sociologist, seeking to explain phenomena across time periods, can also deal with the present (Goldthorpe, 1991).

Although historical sociologists have used primary source materials in their work, most, according to Schwartz, have used information already assembled by historians. This may be due to the desire to avoid the drudgery of digging through archival material. However, the approach of re-packaging the work of historians has been criticized because of the inherent dangers of treating filtered knowledge as objective fact (Gordon, 1998).

Because my dissertation subject spans more than 60 years, through a world war and countless other historical events, it would not be reasonable to rely solely on primary source material. This dissertation relies on the work of historians, while

at the same time uses primary source material from historical archives. Some of the primary source material I used has never before been analyzed from the perspective of power and social control. In addition, I also conducted qualitative research to learn about contemporary rumor control methods. This inclusion of fieldwork and analysis of the “present” meets Goldthorpe’s criteria in distinguishing sociological study from the work of historians (Goldthorpe, 1991).

In the dissertation, rumor control is analyzed using a narrative historical approach. Narrative history has been defined as “the organization of material in chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots” (Griffin, 1993). However, as Griffin points out, “narrative accounts of historical events are not satisfactory sociological explanations of them.” This is certainly the case when the focus of a historical narrative is on the causality of sequential events; a narrative can present the false impression that events simply unfold naturally, with an impression of inevitability. This dissertation uses narrative to do lighter work: mainly to show coherence and connections among the technique, personnel, and approach to rumor control across disparate events over time, using a unified theoretical framework.

Chapter Four concerns contemporary uses of rumor control in the marketing and public relations industries. There was a good deal of information on the subject that was publicly available, including academic and trade publications, news articles, and conference reports. Working in the marketing industry, I was also

able to collect a stash of relevant presentations and other documents. But to augment this material, I also interviewed rumor control practitioners working in the public relations industry. These interviews gave me an understanding of contemporary technique. More importantly, I was able to hear and probe the discourse of rumor control from the perspective of contemporary practitioners.

To recruit subjects, I tapped my personal network, asking colleagues and acquaintances for introductions to professionals involved in rumor control. This was an informal and unscientific process. Indeed, I recruited one subject in an airport lounge. After this initial set of introductions and meetings, I used a snowball sampling process in which I asked subjects for referrals to colleagues with a similar expertise. While admittedly a non-scientific approach to sampling, it fulfilled my goal of identifying people with a very specific set of experiences who otherwise would be very difficult to find. I ended up with interviews of ten subjects. Each interview lasted about an hour, and these interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

In qualitative interviewing, there is a continuum from a very highly structured, data-gathering approach, to an unstructured approach that resembles a friendly conversation (Kvale, 1996, as cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Approaches on the unstructured end of the continuum have the advantage, almost by definition, of allowing for the possibility of a greater breadth of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 652). I chose a “semi-structured” approach which began with a list of questions, but during the interview I encouraged digressions that opened up new

areas on information. Since I work in the same industry as my subjects, from an ethnographic approach I can be considered as a kind of “native speaker,” and it thus made sense to attempt to make the interviews friendly conversations. This approach is seen as an acceptable way to conduct qualitative research in situations similar to mine (Seidman, 2006).

I conducted most of the interviews in my subjects’ offices, and a few over the phone. I began with a list of starting questions, and then let the flow of the conversation take over. I referred to the list of questions occasionally to keep the conversation going. There were some questions I asked nearly all the subjects, including “How do you define a rumor?” and “How did you learn how to control rumors?”, but allowed for digressions. The interviews were usually lively discussions and I believe that the subjects found them enjoyable. The resulting data, analyzed in Chapter Four, was very informative, and I believe that my strategy of using semi-structured interviewing proved to be an effective one.

The Salience of Rumor Control

Throughout its history, surveillance has been a part of rumor control. This aspect of the technique is particularly relevant to us today. In recent years, the United States Government has greatly expanded the range of surveillance over private citizens, and the privacy of American citizens has been substantially eroded. This surveillance has taken a variety of forms, from direct investigation of political groups to massive electronic surveillance and data mining. Corporations, for their

part, have also expanded their ability to collect and mine huge amounts of data about the public's attitudes and behaviors.

In the past several years, there have been many alarming instances of government surveillance. Some of them have directly tied into the Government's efforts to monitor and regulate dissent over its policies. In 2005, reporters revealed that the Department of Homeland Security was infiltrating and monitoring peace groups, including the Quakers. They also uncovered information suggesting that the agency was monitoring the emails of anti-war protesters (Myers, Pasternak, Gardella, & NBC News Investigative Unit, 2005, December 14). In 2007, the American Civil Liberties Union reported that the Pentagon had monitored almost 200 anti-war protests in the United States, and had compiled a database of protesters ("ACLU report shows widespread Pentagon surveillance of peace activists," 2007, January 17). Other instances of government surveillance have been even broader, with the Federal Government establishing far-reaching authority to spy on American citizens. In 2007, reporters discovered that President George W. Bush had issued a Presidential "signing statement" which authorized Federal agencies to open up domestic mail without a search warrant (Meek, 2007, January 4). In 2008, the Wall Street Journal revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) was collecting and analyzing data including cell phone location, who individuals were calling, and which websites individuals were visiting (Gorman, 2008, March 10). Most recently, Congressional leaders approved an update to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act which allows the wiretapping of Americans for up to one week

without a court order if the Government believes vital national security information may be lost. The same bill, supported by both major party Presidential candidates in the 2008 election, provides retroactive immunity for telecom companies who allowed the NSA to eavesdrop on Americans without a court order (Lichtblau, 2007, August 24). This law was passed in a period where surveillance has become pervasive throughout the Federal Government. "There's virtually no branch of the U.S. government that isn't in some way involved in monitoring or surveillance," said Matthew Aid, an intelligence historian and fellow at the National Security Archives at The George Washington University, "We're operating in a brave new world" (Olsen, 2008, July 7).

Privacy is being eroded not only by the U.S. Government, but also by corporations. Increasingly, corporations collect huge amounts of behavioral data in the hopes that it will allow them to better target individuals with marketing messages (and hence, shape the way they think, feel and act). This is especially true in the Internet space, where data about almost every online activity is tracked and stored, becoming a valuable commodity. In July 2008, a U.S. district judge ordered the search company Google to hand over to Viacom a 12 terabyte database which would "disclos[e] who watches which video clips and when" on the popular YouTube website. Experts believe the data can be directly linked to personally-identifiable information ("Court orders YouTube to give Viacom video logs," 2008, July 3). The fact that this data is collected, and that it can be handed over from one company to another in a copyright-infringement lawsuit, exemplifies a time when almost no personal data is completely private, and

information about an individual's behavior can be bought and sold by third parties in the marketplace.

As I discuss in Chapter 4, contemporary rumor monitoring involves using powerful computers to search and mine conversations on the Internet.

Conversations on message boards, where online communities of people share information in a semi-public forum, are harvested, mined and analyzed for information that may be useful to corporate planning or marketing. This is simply an electronic extension of the rumor monitoring done in World War II, when librarians and hairdressers were recruited to listen for, and report on, war rumors. Both kinds of surveillance can have the consequence of eroding trust, privacy, and quality of public and semi-public discourse that people are willing to engage in. Just as anti-war protesters have to be wary of Federal agents infiltrating their organizations, increased surveillance has a chilling effect on interpersonal communication. Privacy is not only a prerequisite for the freedom and openness that allows a democracy to thrive, but it also makes space for the pleasure of open and free exchange.

Fundamentally, rumor control supports propaganda, which helps give elites power over the public. Edward Bernays, one of the pioneers of public relations, wrote in the early 20th century that:

Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.... We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes

formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society.” (Bernays, 2004, p. 37)

Bernays believed that propaganda was a fundamental component of modern democracy. He was wrong. A society in which a small number of powerful people make the decisions for the rest of us is the hallmark of a totalitarian state, not a democracy. Propaganda does not make us freer. In the past decade, we have witnessed one of the crowning achievements of government propaganda: the rallying of public opinion behind a misguided, and almost illogical, war of choice. The selling of the Iraq war, packaged and sold much like a consumer product, shows us both the folly of the elite and their ability to create just enough support to threaten our safety and the safety rest of the world.

The more we know about the tools used in shaping the way we think and feel, the more we can resist their influence—through policy, through education, and through personal resistance to manipulation. It is for that reason that I hope that this history of rumor control sheds a little bit of light on how and why our attitudes are monitored and shaped by corporate and governmental power.

Chapter 2: U.S. Government-directed Rumor Control During **World War II**

Introduction

During World War II, the U.S. government relied on the civilian population to provide the military with a steady supply of food, young men, arms and materiel. The vast production capacity of the United States was seen as a major advantage over the Axis, and maintaining this advantage was seen as vital to winning the war. Consequently, maintaining morale and social stability, key factors in optimal production, was a crucial part of the war effort. War rumors came to be seen as a threat to morale and stability and thus an impediment to winning the war.

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, the loose collection of Federal agencies that had responsibility for domestic war information and intelligence collaborated to find a solution to the rumor problem. During the first full year of American involvement in the war, rumor control, first characterized as a defense against internal enemies, then as a way of probing public opinion and identifying unrest and dissent, preoccupied the top architects of U.S. propaganda strategy. Eventually their efforts would enlist librarians, teachers, dentists and other members of the public to report to the U.S. Government rumors overheard in their communities.

Government rumor control efforts reflected characteristics of President Franklin

Delano Roosevelt's approach to public opinion management: creating and cultivating intelligence channels to understand the public mind, and focusing on rooting out dissent—even if it meant demonizing those who disagreed with public policy. For government officials, “rumors” became synonymous not only with dissatisfaction with the war, but also with resistance to racism and segregation, both of which were interpreted as a threat to social stability and U.S. production capacity.

Although government-sponsored rumor control efforts subsided in early 1943, they left behind a legacy of techniques used for decades to come.

Roots of Rumor Strategy: 1933-1941

One month after the U.S. entry into World War II, the Assistant Chief of the Psychological Division within the Office of Facts and Figures, a U.S. domestic information and intelligence agency, wrote to a colleague at the Bureau of Investigation (BOI), an agency with similar responsibilities, with a warning:

Literally hundreds of thousands of American people are ready and eager to believe any news which even hints at the internal disintegration of the enemy. Once such a belief becomes fixed, the individual makes his plans on a short-term basis and will tend to slacken his effort in the defense program. This, of course, is exactly what the rumors are intended to do, and we feel very strongly that the American public should be warned. We can easily see how it may happen that the Federal Government can encounter a good deal of obstinacy and resistance among the public to war plans of a

long-term nature, if the public is convinced that it is only a matter of weeks or months before the enemy will collapse from the withdrawal of internal support. (Baker, 1942, January)

This memo about rumors, among the first that circulated in these agencies following the U.S. entry into the war, followed a line of thinking that had, by then, been well-established by President Roosevelt himself. To succeed, the Government needed unity and support; this support needed close governmental monitoring; and rumors which spread dissension undermined this support and needed to be actively suppressed.

Indeed, this line of thinking was established at the very beginning of Roosevelt's presidency. In his first "Fireside Chat" radio address on March 12, 1933, in the midst of a national economic crisis following the collapse and closing of thousands of American banks, Roosevelt strove to reassure the American people about the stability of the financial system. After enumerating steps his government was taking to meet the crisis, Roosevelt closed his speech with an appeal for public unity:

There is an element in the readjustment of our financial system more important than currency, more important than gold, and that is the confidence of the people themselves.... You people must have faith; you must not be stampeded by rumors or guesses. Let us unite in banishing fear. We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system, and it is up to you to support and make it work. (Roosevelt, 1933, March 12)

Such appeals, and Roosevelt's mastery of radio to reach into the homes of millions of Americans, was the hallmark of his leadership. But while Roosevelt is known for his pioneering use of radio to communicate with the public, his efforts

in monitoring public opinion were no less integral to his leadership.

Understanding public opinion helped Roosevelt understand the boundaries of policy options and hone his efforts to win elections for himself and his party.

Roosevelt was so intensely interested in understanding the public that one historian calls him “instinctively an intelligence operative” (Kryder, 2001), p. 208), employing “channels to the public mind” that were, according to another historian, “deliberately constructed and carefully maintained” (Steele, 1974, p. 195).

These channels included both formal and informal efforts. In 1933, Roosevelt established the National Emergency Council, which had responsibility for monitoring “grass-roots” public opinion (Steele, 1974, p. 203). With the New Deal stimulating a wide range of opposition to Roosevelt, he used Federal agents working for the Council to identify pockets of resistance. This information was supplemented by correspondence with Roosevelt’s personal contacts across the United States (Steele, 1974) and other “back-channel” connections (Casey, 2001). Roosevelt also read six newspapers a day—with special attention paid to the editorial page—to understand local attitudes and monitor public support (Casey, 2001). Roosevelt was also the first American President to make use of scientific polling techniques, only then emerging during his presidential tenure, to track trends in public attitudes (Cantril, 1967).

But as Roosevelt battled to win over the public on the New Deal, a dangerous foreign threat was emerging. In 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of

Germany. At first Roosevelt viewed Hitler's repressive domestic policies with mere disdain, but Hitler's bellicosity, which included both army conscription and the abrogation of an arms treaty, began to cause him genuine alarm. As Germany rebounded from its economic depression and began to aggressively re-arm, Roosevelt realized that public support needed to be built for possible American intervention. But this presented challenges. The 1930's were "a high-water mark of American isolationism," and Roosevelt was deeply concerned that Americans did not have the stomach for intervening in another European war (Casey, 2001, p. 22). Roosevelt would ruefully declare that he was up "against a public psychology of long standing—a psychology which comes very close to saying 'Peace at any price'" (Casey, 2001, p. 23).

As a consequence, Roosevelt used his New Deal domestic information and intelligence infrastructure to focus on public attitudes toward the war. In 1939, Roosevelt established, by executive order, the Office of Government Reports (OGR). The OGR was established to be a two-way conduit of information, acting as both a clearinghouse of Government information for the press and the public, but also as a means of providing the President with information about public opinion and public mood (M. Lee, 2005). Roosevelt used the OGR to deal "almost exclusively with problems detected in specific groups—Italians in the Bronx, Negroes in Ohio, mothers of servicemen, and the like" (Steele, 1974, p. 203)—in other words, potential pockets of resistance to American intervention in a war that was rapidly was spreading in Europe.

Following his invasions of Poland, Norway and Denmark, Hitler attacked and occupied France and Holland in May 1940. Roosevelt resolved to prepare the public in case U.S. intervention became necessary. International newspapers had reported that “fifth columnists,” treasonous sympathizers carrying out orders from the enemy, had been used to soften up France in advance of a German attack. This was an idea that was accepted by much of the public and government elites, and served as a useful trope for Roosevelt as he maneuvered to win support for military buildup. On May 16, 1941, in a speech requesting increased military appropriations, Roosevelt warned Congress that Germany was using tactics against the U.S. that included “the treacherous use of the ‘fifth column’”. He branded public doubters “‘Nazis’ or, at best, their dupes” (Steele, 1985, p. 72).

Five days later he used this idea with the public—this time linking fifth columnists to rumors. Over the radio, Roosevelt condemned German bellicosity and declared a National Emergency. As he had in the banking crisis, Roosevelt warned against rumors, but this time blamed them not on public confusion instead on enemy infiltration.

Defense today means more than merely fighting. It means morale, civilian as well as military; it means using every available resource; it means enlarging every useful plant. It means the use of a greater American common sense in discarding rumor and distorted statement. It means recognizing, for what they are, racketeers and fifth columnists, who are the incendiary bombs in this country of the moment. (Roosevelt, 1941, May 27)

By identifying fifth columnists as a source of rumors on U.S. soil, Roosevelt was

painting a picture of a war that had already begun.

Roosevelt added to his arsenal of public opinion agencies. In the spring of 1941, Roosevelt established the Office of Civilian Defense by executive order (Winkler, 1978). The OCD was established “to consider proposals, suggest plans, and promote activities designed to sustain the national morale and to provide opportunities for constructive civilian participation in the defense program” (Ref # 33. R. K. Kane, 1942, p. 209). Fiorello La Guardia, the bombastic and popular mayor from New York City, was appointed as Director. When the OCD was branded as ineffective by critics, Roosevelt established the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) in October of that year (Winkler, 1978). According to the executive order which established it, the role of the OFF was to:

Formulate programs designed to facilitate a widespread and accurate understanding of the status and progress of the national defense effort and of the defense policies and activities of the government; and advise the several departments and agencies of the government concerning the dissemination of such defense information. (R. K. Kane, 1942)

The OFF would eventually have 126 employees in its Bureau of Information (BOI), whose job was to analyze public opinion data to judge the “intensity with which opinions are held, their susceptibility to change, the degree to which they conform to social pressures, and the extent to which they are spontaneous and genuine” (Casey, 2001, p. 19) Four months later, the BOI would be taking the lead in national rumor control.

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, killing 2,403 people and ending any remaining ambivalence Roosevelt may have had about U.S. intervention. Two days after the attack and the subsequent U.S. Declaration of War, Roosevelt gave another radio address, his first as a wartime president. Nearly 80% of all American homes tuned in (Casey, 2001, p. 35). In the speech, Roosevelt excoriated Japan's "sudden, criminal attacks" on the American Navy base in the Pacific. He declared that "We are now in this war ... all the way." Then, mid-way through the address, at this crescendo of national crisis, Roosevelt returned to a familiar theme:

Most earnestly I urge my countrymen to reject all rumors. These ugly little hints of complete disaster fly thick and fast in wartime ... Many rumors and reports which we now hear originate, of course, with enemy sources. For instance, today the Japanese are claiming that as a result of their one action against Hawaii they have gained naval supremacy in the Pacific. This is an old trick of propaganda which has been used innumerable times by the Nazis. The purposes of such fantastic claims are, of course, to spread fear and confusion among us, and to goad us into revealing military information which our enemies are desperately anxious to obtain.

Our Government will not be caught in this obvious trap—and neither will the people of the United States. (Roosevelt, 1941, December 9)

In the cauldron of the U.S. Government's war efforts, Roosevelt's emphasis on rumors would have significant repercussions for American domestic information and intelligence agencies. His appointed staff scrambled to understand, track, and control any information that was being passed among the U.S. public relating to the war. Over the next year, U.S. agencies expended time and resources to solve a rumor problem that they assumed threatened the war effort. These

actions would reflect the concerns, beliefs, and ideologies of the United States and its elite during this period, and foreshadow rumor control efforts for many years to come.

World War II and Rumor Control: 1942

What did rumors mean to Government officials during World War II? In the 13 months when Government agencies were most focused on the problem, many definitions were put forth. An OFF official offered a definition in a memo entitled “What is a Rumor?”:

An account of a situation is a rumor when 1. The authoritative source for the account is unknown to the person reporting it ... 2) An authoritative source for the account is designated without authority or verifiability.... 3. The source of the account is an authoritative person acting in an un-authoritative capacity (i.e. ‘leaks’).... Accounts possessing any one of these traits are rumors.... The actual truth or falsity of an account has not bearing on its status as a rumor. (Tyroler, n.d.)

Because the Government was the authority for all war information, a rumor by definition was information that it did not control or authorize. The U.S. Government believed that it should control all communication about the war, including information passed between private citizens. In this way, rumor control was part of a scheme of total information management.

There is little doubt that, following Pearl Harbor, war-related rumors were rampant. There is plenty of evidence to suggest they were causing concern in

many aspects of society. On December 10, 1941, for example, The Hotel Association of New York City, trying to stem cancellations and fill rapidly-emptying hotel rooms, passed a resolution asking the city government to help dispel rumors of impending attacks on the city ("Ask city to aid business; Hotel wants false rumors on safety dispelled," 1941, December 11). A few weeks later, the Pure Food and Drug Association rebutted rumors that enemy agents were poisoning food stocks ("Spikes food poison tale: Washington warns that rumors may be spread by the enemy," 1942, January 1). In an environment high in anxiety and low in information, public speculation about the war and war threats were ubiquitous.

Within the OFF, which was charged with maintaining support for the U.S. war effort, rumors were a significant concern—but not because of empty hotel rooms. OFF officials feared that rumors that could weaken public enthusiasm for mobilization, after the immediate shock of Pearl Harbor wore away. In Kenneth Baker's memo to the Bureau of Investigation, it was the fact that rumors could lead to "a good deal of obstinacy and resistance among the public to war plans" (Baker, 1942, January) that triggered concern. Rumors were in this way seen as a direct threat to U.S. victory.

OFF officials suspected that rumors were the result of deliberate efforts by the Germany to soften up the public for attack. In response to this, in January 1942, two OFF subcommittees, the Office of Education and the Office of the Coordinator of Information, proposed a study to analyze rumors—"one of the

forms of propaganda used with greatest effect by the Axis.” The proposal asserted that “[the] skillful handling of rumors was most helpful to Germany in the preparation and execution of the 1940 campaign in Western Europe ... [and] there is reason to believe that Axis-inspired rumors are already current in the United States” (*A project for the analysis of rumors [Original proposal]*, 1942, January 17). This assertion parroted Roosevelt’s own characterizations of the links between rumors and the fifth column.

There were two aspects to the January proposal. First, the BOI would analyze 30 rumors found prevalent in the foreign and U.S. media and compare them to German short-wave propaganda, looking for links. Second, the Office of Education would recruit college professors and their students to collect rumors in their communities and refute them in local publications and at educational events. The newspaper columns were called “rumor clinics.” Three agencies were to be involved: the Research and Analysis branch of the Office of the Coordinator of Information, the BOI, and the Civilian Morale Service of the Office of Education (Faye, 2007).

The proposal to recruit college professors through the Office of Education would serve two purposes. One would be to monitor public discontent, or as a “Prospectus on Rumor Clinics” dated March 5, 1942 put it: “[provide] valuable and highly contemporary intelligence on the manner in which the enemy is exploiting ‘low pressure areas’ of national morale.” The second goal would be to encourage “a greater unity of action between Governmental and academic circles

for the duration of the war” (*Prospectus on rumor clinics*, 1942, March 5).

Specifically, the clinics would be a “clearinghouse where the suggestions of men in academic life on ‘psychological warfare’, etc., ... will be received” (ibid.) and “function as demonstration centers in program development for public education on rumor analysis and psychological warfare” (C. Williams, n.d.).

Although the proposal was approved in January, and a solicitation letter to college presidents was drafted, concerns over the lack of centralized management of rumor control eventually derailed the proposal (Faye, 2007). The BOI, which had been given authority over rumor control efforts because of its purview over domestic intelligence-gathering, rejected the proposal because it did not want to lose central control over information efforts involving the war (Faye, 2007). The BOI also feared that locally-directed efforts could lead to bad publicity if there efforts were detected.

A new plan was drawn up that would be controlled by the Special Services Division of the BOI. The Division had responsibilities to “survey opinion on a regular basis and to isolate tensions and grievances in the particular area where they originate, “ and to “warn of emerging tensions and grievances before these assume national proportions and to suggest informational measures or other remedies to meet special regional circumstances” (Barth, 1943, p. 73). Rumor control efforts were designed to meet both goals: identifying problem areas of morale, and “remedying” these grievances through information campaigns or, as the record suggests, investigations by law enforcement agencies.

Throughout the spring of 1942, pressure to deal with the rumor problem came from both high and low. In his 20th Fireside Chat on February 23, Roosevelt referred to “weird rumors” of overwhelming destruction at Pearl Harbor and provided authorized casualty figures to stem them. In the same address he exhorted Americans to avoid “rumor-mongers and the poison peddlers in our midst” (Roosevelt, 1942, February 23). Pressure to deal with the rumors also came from regional offices of OFF agencies (Katz) and from the OFF radio branch (Dubois, 1942, March 24). Ardent proposals to deal with rumors would eventually come from private citizens as well, including two advertising executives (KK, 1942, April 1) and even the prominent anthropologist Margaret Mead (Mead, 1942, October 14).

By the end of March, a new rumor control plan was developed, one that would be managed centrally using BOI resources. By then, a number of individuals inside and outside the government had made inquiries about rumor control and offered their help. One such individual was Gordon Allport, a Harvard psychology professor who had already set up his own “rumor clinic” in the Boston area—a newspaper column in the *Boston Herald* which collected and refuted rumors about the war. Allport was a prominent academic who felt that rumors were evidence of Nazi infiltration, a bellwether of public morale, and an important source of data about public attitudes during the war. Beginning in early 1942, Allport and his assistant, R. H. Knapp, corresponded with the OFF about coordinating their efforts, but their locally-directed approach to countering

rumors was ultimately rejected by the OFF and its successor agency. Allport's work during the war made him the leading academic expert in rumor control, described in more detail in the next chapter.

Although OFF officials still professed the belief that rumors came from the enemy, following Roosevelt's lead they faulted disloyal Americans for spreading them. As the next plan was being developed in March, Roosevelt, at a press conference, blamed a "sixth column" of Americans who "wittingly or unwillingly" spread "rumors and doubts" (Lawrence, 1942, March 24). According to an OFF memo, "Rumors [were] proven weapons of Axis propagandists and disloyal American groups" (*A proposal for a study of rumors in the United States*, n.d.). However, the line between treason and dissent blurred, particularly for the purposes of rumor control. Rumors would be linked to "disunity of opinion" and "obstructionist opinions"—namely, those who questioned war efforts (Horowitz, 1942, July 17). Perhaps in consequence, the March rumor control plans stipulated that rumor clinic "volunteers should be carefully considered by the head of the Clinic to make certain that he or she has demonstrated loyalty to American institutions and has at no time since 1939 advocated appeasement" (C. S. Williams, 1942, February 16).

While the proposal for a new rumor control effort was still being developed, domestic information agencies, including the OFF, underwent organizational upheaval. In June, partly due to charges that the OFF had not been effective in managing the flow of information to the public, a more centralized organization,

named the Office of War Information (OWI), was established with Elmer Davis, a popular radio columnist, appointed as Director. The OWI consolidated a number of agencies including the Office of Government Reports, the Office of Emergency Management, the Foreign Information Service, the OFF and the BOI.

While the OWI was established as an agency whose purpose was to help win the war, (Davis, 1943), it would become a somewhat conflicted organization. Some officials within the OWI wanted to use propaganda to rally the public behind inspirational war themes, just as the Committee for Public Information had done during World War I. Others felt that facts and the “truth” of the war could speak for itself (Feller, 1943; Winkler, 1978). For an agency that was uncomfortable with direct propaganda but fretted over the “multiplicity of voices [which make for] serious confusion of the public mind” (Feller, 1943, p. 56), rumor control was a logical choice, since it could help regulate public attitudes without resorting to recognizable propaganda tactics.

The bureaucratic reshuffling slowed rumor control planning, and put an end to the March proposal, but over the summer a new rumor study was developed. Like the OFF before it, the OWI was not only preoccupied with understanding public opinion, it was also charged with maintaining morale through the provision of information. This was tricky, because the Government wanted to keep as much information as possible, particularly relating to casualties, war plans, and war production, out of the hands of the enemy. However, officials suspected that the absence of information sowed suspicion and rumor among the public.

Over the summer of 1942, the OWI had plenty of reasons to be concerned with public morale. According to a poll in July, 30% of Americans said they didn't have a clear idea of what the war was all about (Winkler, 1978, p. 54). A Harpers' columnist described the public mood that summer as "clouded, divided, doubtful, hesitant and therefore apprehensive," noting that "Morale has fallen off because the public has not been told enough" (Faye, 2007). For the OWI agencies, this was a serious problem, and solving it was central to its mission.

Reflecting a belief that providing the "truth" to the people would be sufficient in winning their support, calibrating the flow of war information became a new objective of rumor study. In July, a study was proposed to validate the hypothesis "That in a given news area or in a potential news area, the amount of rumor increases as news decreases or lack of news becomes apparent." This hypothesis was expressed in a general formula, $R=I/N$, where R is "rumor," I is "interest," and N is "news": Various factors for each of the variables enumerated in the proposal (*Memorandum on Study S-68: A Study of War-Time Rumors in Two Defenses Communities*, 1942, July 24). The proposal suggested that rumors be collected through OGR field staff in 31 locations; "listening posts" in Boston, Wichita and Cleveland; "correspondence panels" in various locations; Polls and Surveys field staff; and the staff of 100 CBS radio affiliates, facilitated by the OWI's relationship with the President of CBS, Frank Stanton (E. Katz, 1942, July 18).

Rebutting rumors was no longer the rationale for the use of rumor clinics. Instead, the proposal included an entirely new justification for rumor study; rather than countering Axis propaganda, rumor study was now seen as an innovative tool to probe the public mind. “It seems reasonable”, said a July memo, “to suppose that the rumors more prevalent within a given group than in the population at large will throw light on the overall morale of the group and more specifically :a) What events does it hope for? b) What consequences does it fear? c) Toward whom is it most hostile, etc.? “ (E. Katz, 1942, July 17). Rumors promised to provide a powerful new window on public opinion:

It should be pointed out that a “rumor” study in which data on opinion are collected informally sheds light on the problem of the “private”, more personal, attitudes of the American people as compared to data obtained by ordinary polling and interview techniques, which ordinarily provide data on “public” attitudes. A study of “rumor” may provide hypotheses for “better-controlled” polling or interview studies, but the highly personal data obtained by the technique use in the “rumor” study is very useful in its own right (*Contributions of enemy sources to the study of ‘rumors’ in the United States [Memo from the Bureau of Intelligence Enemy Sources Division], 1942, September 1*).

Not all attitudes were of equal interest, however. The focus of the rumor study was dissent, and using information to negate it. Eugene Horowitz, who would later classify rumors collected in the project, wrote on July 17, 1942:

In an atmosphere of silence, that which is said may carry undue weight or influence; disunity of opinion varies inversely with the availability of clear-cut information. (“Disunity of opinion” here means more than confusion; it is meant to emphasize obstructionist aspects of the opinions which circulate). (E. Katz, 1942, July 17, *parenthetical statement in original*)

The proposal was approved and the plan was deployed over a two-week period in August 1942. A total of about 4500 rumors were collected by staff from a number of Federal agencies. Also collecting rumors was a “Librarians Panel” that was asked to report rumors both told to them as well as those they overheard (*This is the rumor letter that has just gone out to 16 librarians [letter and attached hand-written note]*, 1942, August 5). Civilian volunteers, recruited and supervised by the Office of Government Reports, filled out “rumor report sheets,” which asked for verbatim reports of rumors, the location and date of the rumors, and information about the “rumormonger” who was spreading it. These volunteers included dentists and barbers, chosen for their exposure to the public (Faye, 2007). Scores of rumors were also collected by high school teachers from their children in dozens of states.

The project was far from an unqualified success. According to Eugene Horowitz, who analyzed the rumors, “the analysis so far makes quite clear that it would be futile to attempt a quantitative study of the present rumor material. People’s conceptions of rumors differed, they were not reported verbatim, in different sections of the country different circles within the community were tapped for rumors, and at the present time there is no comparable base from which a statistical evaluation would be meaningful.” Horowitz remarked, however, that his comments “represent a criticism of this particular study and by no means a necessary criticism of this type of study,” and recommended continuous analysis to “spot areas of special problems, since rumors reflect attitudes” (Horowitz, 1942, August 26).

It's clear why Horowitz had trouble analyzing the rumors. Data quality was poor: with fragments, stories, jokes, and reports of political attitudes provided as rumors. Rumors sent by teachers included crude cartoons drawn by students. In some cases, reporters had trouble reporting anything at all. A regional nutrition representative wrote in a letter to the Bureau that even though "she listened rather intently during the week" she heard "nothing whatsoever that might be classified as a rumor of war information" (Beatley, 1942, August 9).

Nevertheless, the rumors were classified into various categories and sub-categories, with dissent emerging as a common theme. Many of the rumors were critical comments about the Government, gripes, and skeptical comments about the war effort. In a document summarizing the rumors, the highest incidence of rumors classified (after miscellaneous headings) is "Criticism of Government." One included subcategory is "We can't believe what we're told; news is withheld and distorted," exemplified by the rumor "'Good news is being held back until such a time as it may be advantageous to release in order to off-set the bad news.'" In this way, by design or circumstance, the rumors collected reflected the rumor study's rationale of identifying resistance to the war effort (*Government information policy and practice [Memo labeled "Horowitz" in handwritten note]*, n.d.).

The OWI was reticent to publicly refute rumors, fearing that this could give credence to them. However, there is evidence to suggest that the OWI

coordinated with the FBI in investigating some rumors. A newspaper article, dated Oct 27, 1942, in the OWI rumor files at the Library of Congress is titled “Federal Investigators Checking Capital’s Rumor Originators.” The author of the article asserts that:

all types of criticism that might be enemy-inspired are of interest to the intelligence services, whose duty it is to ferret out enemy agents and their stooges. Thus, a marked defeatist attitude will lead to an investigation which may disclose a mysteriously swollen bank account. (*Federal investigators checking capital’s rumor originators*, 1942, October 27)

Another article in the files titled “Oil News Editor Hits FBI Probe of Rumors” reports that “the regional Office of War Information announced the FBI was attempting to learn the sources” of reports of rumors that the end of gas rationing would be postponed. Quoted in the article is a man accusing the OWI and the FBI of politically motivated rumor investigations calling them “a Gestapo-like operation” (*Oil news editor hits FBI probe of rumors*).

With the study results came the slow realization that rumors may not be the result of enemy infiltration after all. An OWI official wrote in October that “The cause of ... rumors ... is not so much the enemy as our tenseness and anxiety about the conduct of the war” (*[KK letter to Warren Walsh]*, 1942, October). While this realization, and the lackluster study results, may have dampened enthusiasm within the OWI, external pressure to confront rumors remained. Rumor control efforts were needed to satisfy the internal demand for action. “Rumors about rumors are, perhaps, the most dangerous aspect of the rumor

problem,” wrote one OFF official (E. Katz, 1942, October 8). But the attention on rumors would be hard to ignore—the same official would, later that month, recommend continued study “because of the importance of this question in the front office and in other Government departments” (E. Katz, 1942, October 24).

The August rumor study would be the last one undertaken by the Federal Government. Before the end of 1942, however, the OWI created a lengthy “rumor bible” to be provided when local groups inquired about setting up their own rumor control operations. This guide was designed not to help these clinics, however, but to discourage them. A memo summarizing a new internal policy states that the “OWI will prepare a questionnaire to be sent to local rumor clinics, [the] purpose of which will be to ask so many and so elaborate questions as to discourage rumor clinics” (E. Katz, 1942, October 24). What started with attempts to stop rumors ended with efforts to shut down, at least on the local level, rumor control itself.

Rumors and the ‘Negro Problem’

In his May, 1941 Fireside Chat, the same one in which he asked Americans to use “common sense in discarding rumor and distorted statement,” Roosevelt linked rumors to “enemies of democracy in our midst—the Bundists, the Fascists, and Communists, and every group devoted to bigotry and racial and religious intolerance” (Roosevelt, 1941, May 27). In this way, Roosevelt deftly conflated

American racism and enemy infiltration. This idea that a foreign enemy was the source of racism, and that racist attitudes were being spread by a fifth column of enemy sympathizers, would become the qualified belief and the official position of those working on rumor control within the OFF and the OWI.

During the War, the Government targeted a number of immigrant groups, including German- and Italian-Americans, and, most notoriously, interned approximately 110,000 Japanese Americans in “War Location Camps”. War authorities also openly fretted about problems stemming from the country’s African-American population. From the beginning of the war, OFF officials believed they had a “Negro problem,” and that this problem was related to rumors. In January, 1942, an official wrote in a note attached to a memo about restiveness and low morale among Black Americans: “Does the attached fit into the Rumor Clinic Section—Does it help on the Negro problem currently?” The recipient of the note, Assistant Director of the BOI, Keith Kane, wrote in a handwritten reply, “Yes” (K. Kane, 1942, January).

What was this “Negro problem”? Put in the simplest terms, it was part of the Government’s general concern with maintaining maximum workforce productivity. The U.S. relied disproportionately on African Americans, who were effectively shut out from most military service, to take up unskilled and semi-skilled war factory positions (Kryder, 2001). Because of this, low morale among African Americans was viewed as a serious threat to workforce equanimity and productivity. Furthermore, the demands of African Americans for better

treatment, which could (and later would) manifest into strikes and civil disturbances, were seen as a threat to social stability.

The Government's concern that Black Americans did not wholeheartedly support the war was not without foundation. Subjected to segregation, racism, and poverty, the war abroad was not divorced from conditions at home in the minds of many Black Americans. An OFF survey in early 1942 found that nearly one-half of Black respondents believed that they would be "at least as well off under Japanese rule" (Koppes & Black, 1986). This ambivalence towards the war was made clear to the Secretary of the New York NAACP when he addressed a Black audience in the Midwest in 1942. When he told them about a student who said he hoped Hitler would win because conditions at home for Blacks couldn't get worse, the NAACP official expected the audience to share his dismay. Instead, the audience "burst into such applause that it took some thirty or forty seconds to quiet it" (White, 1942, p. 67).

Discontent among Black Americans was matched with resentment among Whites. World War II greatly increased the demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labor and this had a serious impact on labor and race relations. For Black Americans, war production jobs provided better wages than those in the field and in the kitchen, giving them newfound leverage in the labor market. As a result, White Americans, particularly in the South, struggled to maintain the advantage that institutional racism had provided them. As one farm owner commented, "Negroes have got to be bossed, and you can't boss them when they

make that kind of money and when they can get another job anywhere they want” (Kryder, 2001, p. 221). This provoked extreme measures in the White power structure. The Governor of Alabama proclaimed a “work or jail policy” that required males between 18 and 55 to work at least 35 hours a week. In Georgia, the police required Blacks to carry identification verifying employment with an up-to-date work schedule; those without it risked arrest (Kryder, 2001). These measures reflected desperation to maintain control over the labor of Blacks, on which the Southern economy relied.

Reflecting this concern, it was problems with labor, not discrimination, which were the subject of rumor discussions at the OFF and the OWI. The “Negro problem” that concerned agency officials was not the inequality and mistreatment of Blacks, but rather ensuring that restiveness in the African American population did not threaten war productivity. Rumors about Black demands for rights were of particular concern, since these demands were seen as a threat to social stability.

Early in 1942, officials in the OFF assumed that any kind of rumor that suggested social instability was the result Axis propaganda—even those of Black Americans resisting segregation. On March 14, 1942, in an internal memo, Kane equated a rumor of a Black woman’s refusal sit at the back of a bus with an enemy “whispering campaign”:

A call from R.L. Webster in the Secretary’s Office at Agriculture this

morning brought out a rumor which has been bothering him, since he has heard three versions of it, indicating to him that a concerted campaign is on to cause trouble among the negro population.... His wife heard it as a difficulty on an Alexandra bus, with a negress who refused to sit at the back of the bus [saying] 'I'll be glad when the Japs win. Maybe we negroes will get some consideration then...'
This, it seems to me, is the type of whispering campaign we should check on" (Grover, 1942, March 14).

In this note, Kane's true beliefs about the source of the stories are ambiguous.

Whether he means that Nazis are responsible for inciting resistance to segregation—or simply responsible for spreading rumors about such resistance, is not clear. Either way, even stories of defiance against racism merited alarm at the OWI, and enemy rumors were held to be at least partially to blame.

Publicly, the enemy was given full blame for rumors causing racial instability.

The idea that race rumors came from the Axis was publicized by the Director of the OWI, Elmer Davis. In a newspaper story, Davis proclaimed to editors of four Southern newspapers:

"I should like to commend you as heartily as possible your recent editorial exposure of false and inflammatory rumors about the danger of racial conflicts ... There is every reason to suppose that such stories are invented by the enemy for the deliberate purpose of provoking such troubles. To turn the light on these false-hoods is a patriotic services not only to your community but to the nation."
("Lauds 4 editors in South – Davis praises their exposure of false racial rumors," 1942, August 29)

As part of its August rumor study, the OWI collected dozens of rumors relating to Black Americans, mainly sourced from White Americans. Many of these rumors were thinly-veiled expressions of fear that the social position of Black Americans

was being challenged. These rumors included:

“Two negro soldiers went to the white rest room and tried to go in”.
(Bus passenger, Montgomery 8/7/42) (*Collection of handwritten notes about rumors*], c. 1942)

“Did you hear about those negro soldiers trying to eat in a white restaurant on (----) street?” (Businessman, Montgomery, 8/7/42.) (ibid.)

“From Many Recurrent Sources Widely Spread: A story that two white ladies went to the negro section to employ maids. They saw two negro women sitting on the front porch and asked directions to find negro girls who wanted employment. The colored woman replied: ‘We don’t know, Mam, we are looking for maids ourselves.’” Jacksonville, Florida 8-6-42 (ibid.)

“Unknown Man: Quoted ... as saying unidentified negro made statement that after the war, ‘The colored people will be in charge of things, and that they will have full racial equality.’” Jacksonville, Fla. 8-3-42 (ibid.)

One rumor that best exemplified White fears was the “Eleanor Rumor,” one of the most common rumors during the war (Odum, 1943/1997), many versions of which were collected by the OWI. This rumor was named after Eleanor Roosevelt, who had earned the enmity of many White Americans for her symbolic actions against racism and segregation (Goodwin, 1994). The gist of the “Eleanor Club” rumor was that Blacks were organizing boycotts in their communities to demand better pay and working conditions. The rumored motto of the club was “A white woman in her kitchen by Christmas” (Sitkoff, 1971). The rumor was so prevalent that it came to the attention of newspapers, the BOI (*Correspondence between William Webber and Katz*], 1942, September 1), and Eleanor Roosevelt herself—who asked the FBI to investigate. Roosevelt historian Doris Goodwin writes:

After a comprehensive field investigation, the FBI concluded definitively that, despite the great sweep of rumors, not a single Eleanor Club actually existed. The answer to the mystery, the FBI observed, lay in the troubles white women were experiencing retraining their Negro servants in the face of the higher-paying factory jobs the war had made available. “It was logical that the blame was to be placed upon something or somebody,” the FBI wrote. (Goodwin, 1994, p. 370-1)

By late 1942, the OWI began to share the FBI’s realization that the “Eleanor Club” rumor, and many other rumors about Black resistance, were due to White reactions to Blacks, as opposed to some Nazi conspiracy. Rumors relating to race were classified by the OWI in a folder titled “Social Problems, Race Discrimination” (*[Collection of handwritten notes about rumors]*, c. 1942). When the final report on rumors was circulated internally at the end of 1942, these submissions were renamed as “hate rumors,” defined by the expression of “prejudice, animosity, or hostility for groups other than the enemy.” “Hate rumors” were said to be most common of five rumor classifications, and the report acknowledged that the rumors may have sprung not from the enemy, but from social conditions:

The evidence shows clearly that many “hate rumors” originate in the United States as symptoms of domestic social and economic problems—especially problems which war creates or intensifies ... The analysis of rumors will often point to imperfections in real conditions in the community ... The rumor-control group can legitimately call to the attention of the proper agencies and officials the need for corrective measures. (*Memorandum on Rumors and Rumor-Control Groups*, 1942, December 29)

This acknowledgement was qualified, however, with the idea that while the

rumors may not come from the enemy, “The rumor-control project can perform a significant service by making people aware that in spreading hate-rumors they are playing into the hands of the enemy’s strategy of ‘Divide and Conquer.’”

Accordingly, and befitting its role as a domestic information agency, the OWI concluded that “One necessary answer lies in widespread community campaigns designed to attack the sources of hate, to expose the prejudices which lead to hate-rumors, and to blanket hate-rumors with energetic information programs” (*Memorandum on Rumors and Rumor-Control Groups*, 1942, December 29).

Despite this, after the final rumor report was publicized, and information about its findings released to the public, it was Axis machinations, not “imperfections in the real conditions in the community,” that were publicly blamed for race-related rumors. In an article titled “The War on Lies” published in the New York Times, an unnamed government official summarizes the OWI report:

“‘The hate rumor’”, the OWI anti-rumor expert said, “is the meanest, nastiest most prevalent and most dangerous one of the lot. The hate rumor is a definite arm of the Nazi ‘divide-and-conquer’ technique. The Nazi agents and sympathizers do not succeed so much in starting these rumors as they do in intensifying the circulation of hate rumors, which groups bearing prejudices peculiar to certain localities are all too willing to start.” (Shalett, 1943, January 24)

During the war, some of the OWI’s worst fears of racial disturbances would come true. Howard Sitkoff, a noted historian of Black American history, calls race riots on military bases “ubiquitous” as early as 1942 (Sitkoff, 1971). Sitkoff also partially blames on riots in Detroit and Harlem a rumor of a Black soldier killed

by a White policeman. He also blames a rumor of a Black man raping a White woman on a White mob of 3000 workers who burned, looted and terrorized a Black neighborhood in Texas, halting war production and triggering a declaration of martial law. Of course, it is impossible to ascertain the validity of such claims. Notably, however, some twenty-five years later, riots in scores of Black neighborhoods across the United States were also be blamed on rumors, leading to the institution of rumor control efforts that had been tested during World War II. This is the subject of Chapter 4.

The Black Press

The OFF viewed race-related rumors as a threat to morale. But in its efforts to reduce expressions of Black discontent, the Government also thought it had another problem: the Black press. During World War I, George Creel, head of the Committee for Public Information (CPI), the government's main propaganda agency, blamed Black newspapers for spreading enemy propaganda. Under Creel, the CPI circulated a pamphlet saying that German agents had "thousands of propagandists among the Negroes, exciting them with stories of impossible atrocities committed against the colored people" (Washburn, 1975). During World War II, the Black press was similarly blamed for riling up anger among Blacks, mainly because Black newspapers were an important advocate of the rights of Black Americans. Because of this, the U.S. Government kept a close eye on the Black press, and some officials, like J. Edgar Hoover, tried to suppress it.

The Black press was a vocal and important advocate for the rights of Black Americans. While generally supportive of the war effort, Black newspapers argued that Blacks also needed to fight discrimination at home. This was best exemplified by the “Double V” campaign, launched by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, considered at the time to be the most powerful Black newspaper in the country (Nelson, 1999). In January, 1942, the *Courier* published a letter from James Thompson, a cafeteria worker from Wichita, Kansas, which asked:

Should I sacrifice my life to live half-American? Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow? Let colored Americans adopt the Double V for the double victory. The first V for victory over our enemies from without. The second V for victory over our enemies from within.” (Nelson, 1999)

Thousands of readers wrote in to the *Courier* in support of the Double V idea, prompting the newspaper to launch an extensive campaign around the idea (Nelson, 1999). The newspaper devoted huge amounts of space to promoting Double V (Washburn, 1975), and even created a Double V logo that adorned the papers’ front pages. The idea captured the imagination of Black Americans. Soon, according to one historian:

You had women walking around with Double Vs on their dresses. You had a new hairstyle called the “doubler” where black women would walk around and weave ... two Vs in their hair. You had Double V baseball games, Double V flag-waving ceremonies, Double V gardens. I mean it’s just Double V this, Double V this, Double V this. And The Pittsburgh Courier, which was looking for circulation, played this to the hilt. There was even a Double V song. (Nelson, 1999)

For the same reason that they tracked race rumors—thinking that they may contribute to the Negro Problem—the OFF and other Government agencies kept a close eye on Black newspapers. In January 1942, the OFF prepared a survey of Black attitudes, compiled in a report titled “Negro Attitudes Toward the War,” and started preparing weekly reports of the content of Black media (Washburn, 1975). The OFF was not alone in tracking the Black press. Overall, there were a total of seven agencies who investigated the Black press during the war: the Justice Department, the FBI, the Post Office Department, the OFF, the OWI, the Office of Censorship, and the Army (Washburn, 1975). In fact, there was so much investigation of the Black press during World War II that one official from the OFF called it a “muddle” (Barnes, 1942, quoted in Washburn, 1975).

Some of the most extensive efforts to monitor and suppress the Black press came from the FBI, under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover. Even before the war, Hoover argued vehemently that the Black press should be curtailed by the Government. Starting as early as 1919, the Hoover’s Bureau of Investigation (the FBI’s precursor) investigated Black publications “vigorously and continuously” (Washburn, 1986, p. 3). That year, Hoover wrote that “if possible something should be done to the editors of these [Black] publications as they are beyond doubt exciting the negro elements in this country to riot and to the committing of outrages of all sorts” by publicizing racial complaints (Hoover, 1919, quoted in Washburn, 1986). According to Hoover, Black newspapers not only stirred up discontent, they were also actively advocating communist ideas (Washburn, 1986). Hoover directly blamed the Black press for inciting race riots, and pushed

for a peacetime sedition law which he could use to shut them down (Washburn, 1986).

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hoover wasted little time in renewing his attack on the Black press. Less than eight weeks after Pearl Harbor, Hoover sought his first indictment of a Black publication under the Espionage Act (Washburn, 1986). He prevailed upon the Justice Department to prosecute the Black newspapers for sedition, an effort that was blocked on principle by Attorney General Francis Biddle (Washburn, 1986). Hoover continued to try to find evidence to build his case that the Black press was dangerous enough to warrant government censorship. The FBI investigated Black newspapers so frequently that one publisher of a Black newspaper said it was a “rare day” when the FBI did not come by the newspaper during the first two years of the war (Washburn, 1986, p. 5). These investigations provided some of the fodder for a 714-page “Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States” Hoover published in September 1943 in which Hoover argued that:

Sources of information have volunteered the opinion that the Negro press is a strong provocator [*sic*] of discontent among Negroes. It is claimed that its general tone is not at all, in many instances, informative or helpful to its own race. It is said that more space is devoted to alleged instances of discrimination or mistreatment of Negroes than there is to matters which are educational or helpful. (FBI, 1943, quoted in Washburn, 1986)

Two decades later, Hoover oversaw a major surveillance effort of the African American population, which would include paid informants and “listening posts”

in Black communities. Hoover also used rumors as a weapon against Black organizations. This is discussed in the next chapter.

Rumor Control through Mass Media: Posters and Moving Pictures

The OWI was also in charge of generating and sustaining public enthusiasm for the war through the creation and coordination of posters and films. Given the attention that the OWI gave to rumors throughout 1942, it is not surprising such efforts included efforts to stifle them. While most of the correspondence about rumors in the OFF and the OWI concerned the rumor projects just described, the public was exposed most to rumor control through posters and movies, many of which were created by or in coordination with the OWI.

The OWI considered pictures “among the most powerful means of touching the individual,” with one OWI official professing that “people should wake up to find a visual message everywhere, like new snow—every man, woman and child should be reached and moved by the message” (“Outline for the Coordination of Government War Graphics,” 1942, as cited in (Bird & Rubenstein, 1998).

Consequently, a “Visual Art Division” was established within the OWI, led by two men drawn from the advertising industry. The Visual Art Division acted as a central clearinghouse for poster production, distribution, and coordination. The OWI’s work was complemented by efforts in other Government agencies as well

as myriad private efforts.

The Visual Arts Division of the OWI identified rumors as a specific subject to be addressed in their campaigns. An “Outline for OFF Visual Arts Production,” established three war poster themes, and mentioned “special instructional posters like the ‘don’t talk series’” (Bird & Rubenstein, 1998). September 1942, Keith Kane wrote that:

“Don’t talk” and “don’t rumor” are quite different as informational themes. Careless talking may give valuable information to the enemy. Careless rumor mongering ... isn’t calculated so frequently to give valuable information to the enemy. Its danger lies in its harmful effects on Americans themselves. (Bryson, 1942, September 30)

Both the exhortations, “don’t talk” and “don’t rumor,” became the basis for more than a twenty propaganda posters during the war.

Collections of World War II posters exist in several books (Bird & Rubenstein, 1998; Samuel, 2001) as well as collections online, most notably, a collection at Northwestern University. The provenance of many of the posters is unclear. But a review of these poster collections reveals at least eighteen posters relating to the danger of rumors or, more generally, of talk itself. Of the two themes, most war posters focused on “careless talking,” often utilizing striking and emotional imagery to convey the danger of communicating information that could be overheard by the enemy. One poster shows a grieving child holding a picture of a soldier over the words “Don’t Kill Her Daddy With Careless Talk”. Another shows a sailor looking out a ship porthole with the words “if you talk too much This Man May Die”. A third poster features a picture of woman with the words “Wanted!

For Murder. Her careless talk costs lives,” and another claims that “Loose Talk Costs Lives”.

Several posters focus specifically on rumors. Two posters link rumors to American deaths. One shows a sinister-looking man straining to hear, pictured next to a newspaper clip of a U-boat killing 22 sailors. The tagline is “Rumor cost us lives”. Another poster states in large lettering “Blackout—the rumors!!! Silence saves lives. U.S. Marines”. Several are more abstract in their condemnation of rumor. One shows an offset image of Uncle Sam with the slogan “No room for rumors”. Finally, one poster blurs the line between rumors and “loose talk”: a poster labeled “Published by the House of Seagram” shows a drawing of Hitler with a megaphone in his ear. The text says: “Even in this friendly tavern there may be enemy ears. Stop Loose Talk. Rumors.”

Moving pictures were also used in efforts to combat rumors, though these were not created by the OWI itself. The short film, “Mr. Blabbermouth,” produced by MGM, combined direct refutation of several war rumors, stigmatization of a “blabbermouth” character in the film, and assertions that internal spies were spreading rumors as part of Hitler’s plans to divide and conquer the U.S. The film asserts Hitler used rumors in Germany to “set Labor against Capital and Capital against Labor” (“Mr. Blabbermouth at *The Internet Movie Database*”).

At least one other rumor-related film was released, an animated version of “Chicken Little” produced by Walt Disney studios. Through allegory, the film exemplified the dangers of rumors in war, using a character named “Foxy Loxy”

who quotes from Mein Kampf and consorts with a character named “Izan” (“Nazi” spelled backwards) (“Chicken Little (1943 film),” 2006, December 3). In October 1942, the OWI acknowledged Chicken Little as “an anti-rumor cartoon,” and discussed whether to use it “as part of the anti-security or anti-rumor campaign” (E. Katz, 1942, October 5).

Conclusion

The internal debate within the OFF and the OWI over rumor control ended in 1942, and there is no evidence to suggest that further rumor study was done by the U.S. Government during the war. The OWI had decided to discourage local rumor control efforts, and, apart from posters and movies, there is no evidence to suggest that further centrally-directed efforts took place.

The decline of rumor efforts coincided with the dismantling of the OWI. After Congressional mid-term elections in 1942, the OWI came under increasing Government attack. Republicans and conservative Democrats were the big winners in the November election, and they were hostile towards U.S. war propaganda efforts. Southern Democrats were suspicious of the OWI’s stance towards Negroes, and Republicans distrusted having a domestic propaganda agency led by their political rivals. In June of 1943, the OWI’s budget was slashed, leaving the agency with, according to Director Elmer Davis, just enough to “avoid the odium of having to put out of business, and carefully not enough to let us accomplish much” (Koppes & Black, 1990, p. 138).

Nevertheless, this lack of activity, and the OWI efforts to discourage local rumor clinics, did not put an end to rumor control during the war. In January 1943, the OWI counted 40 rumor clinics in operation across the United States. In May of 1943, the New York Times reported a discussion at the Eastern Psychological Association at Hunter College on 35 rumor clinics across the U.S. and Canada, and, in late September, the New York University Psychology Club organized a clinic to trace rumors to their source. Many of these efforts were advised by Gordon Allport, who told the Eastern Psychological Association that rumor control efforts could effectively trace rumors to their source 50% of the time. Allport's rumor work, which formed the academic foundation for rumor control for the next several decades, is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Rumor Control during the 1960s and Early 1970s

“Send a ferocious rumor into a receptive ear, and you could get a riot in return.”

-- “The Explosive Power of Rumors”, *Parade Magazine*, May 19, 1968

(Molleson, 1968, May 19)

From World War II to the 1960s

During 1942, when the Office of War Information was organizing and implementing its rumor control efforts, the “Negro problem” was shorthand for concerns about Black wartime productivity. As the war progressed, however, race-related violence became a serious issue. The United States experienced terrible rioting incidents during 1943 in Harlem, Detroit, Los Angeles, Belle Isle (Michigan), and dozens of other cities. In light of these problems, several social scientists, including two involved in Government wartime propaganda and rumor control activities, argued that rumors were partly to blame for riots. Their argument that rumor control could and should be used to prevent racial violence was articulated in the social science literature. This analysis, particularly the work of Gordon Allport, who directed rumor clinics during the war, would become influential when the country confronted its next big wave of racial violence in the 1960s.

As early as 1943, influential social scientists made the case for rumor control to prevent riots. Hadley Cantril, a Princeton social scientist and personal advisor to Roosevelt during his three terms—labeled by one historian as “one of FDR’s chief channels for gauging the mood of the American people” (Casey, 2001, p. 19) — wrote an article in 1943 about preventing riots in U.S. occupied territories. Cantril approached the subject from the perspective of a pollster, writing that:

to prevent riots.... *Keep yourself regularly and accurately* [sic] *informed* of what people in all sections of the public are thinking.... This can be done in many ways—by some polling mechanism adapted to the situation, by skillful interviewing, by overhearing conversations, by analyzing mail of the press, by keeping track of rumors, etc. (Cantril, 1943, Winter, p. 672-3)

Despite his advice to the OWI during the war to avoid refuting rumors domestically (he feared that official refutation of rumors would spread them further) (Cantril, 1942, February 28), Cantril asserted that as occupiers, the U.S. should “*control rumors*. Watch out for rumors, note their frequency and nature; if they seem at all serious or unusual, scotch them quickly with authoritative and widely publicized answers” (Cantril, 1943, Winter).

The same year that Cantril published his article on riot and panic control, two sociologists, Alfred McClung Lee and Norman Humphrey, published a book called *Race Riots* in which they argued that rumor control was necessary in preventing domestic racial violence. Lee and Humphrey argued that rumors were a natural phenomenon of social life, but became pernicious in a climate of racial

tension. While *Race Riots* mainly credited migration and political demagoguery as causes of rioting during the war, the authors also blamed rumor “viruses” which they said spread racial discord:

As people “mill around” in their ordinary day-to-day lives, rumors are common enough, rumors about all sorts of things. These rumors are largely random and seldom important beyond the individuals involved. But as racial tensions mount, the rumors that circulate take on a nastier and more purposive character. They cease being merely idle gossip with little or no basis in fact and become more biting and direct in their dynamic contribution to the more and more rapidly turning whirlpool of mob hysteria. (A. M. Lee & Humphrey, 1968/2007, p. 109)

Like Cantril, the authors believed that monitoring public opinion was vital to preventing these dangerous mobs. “Essential to any anti-race-riot program,” they wrote, “is an accurate and constant ‘feel of the pulse’ of Negro-white tensions” (A. M. Lee & Humphrey, 1968/2007, p. 125). They specifically prescribed rumor control tracking in this process. In their “Program for Preventing Race Riots,” they asserted that “the first step in the prevention of race riots is to learn to spot ... symptoms of the riot virus” including rumors, which they called part of the “the verbal milling process” (A. M. Lee & Humphrey, 1968/2007, p. 107).

Lee and Humphrey outlined a program in which rumors would be monitored as part of a systematic intelligence effort to prevent race violence, and the tactics they described mirrored some of the OWI’s efforts during World War II. “The ‘feel of the pulse’ should be taken by a *variety of kinds of reporters* so that a dependable check may be obtained,” they wrote, and these “informants” should include people “who

have normal functions that bring them constantly into intimate contact with people scattered through a variety of occupations.... including social workers, policemen, police-women, school teachers, recreation supervisors, building inspectors ... labor leaders, ministers, school teachers working in an unofficial capacity, physicians, lawyers, bartenders, barbers, and a group of trained and paid public opinion interviewers (A. M. Lee & Humphrey, 1968/2007). The discipline of rumor monitoring, used by the OWI to check low wartime morale, was in this way applied to the problem of race-related violence.

More than 20 years later, this analysis would reappear in an official riot control manual. In his comprehensive guide on the cause and control of riots, Raymond Momboisse, Deputy Attorney General of California and member of Riot Advisory Committee on the President's Commission on Law Enforcement, described how "verbal milling" was a factor leading to race riots. Given the uncommon nature of the term, and the similar way that Momboisse uses the term in his manual, it is likely that Lee and Humphrey's book was a direct influence (Momboisse, 1967, p. 57).

Gordon Allport and the "Psychology of Rumor"

Another sociologist, directly involved in World War II rumor control efforts, had an even more fundamental influence on the development of rumor control. Gordon Allport, a Harvard social psychologist, literally "wrote the book" on the psychology of rumors, and his "law" that rumors were implicated in all riots would become one of the main rationales for rumor control during America's intense period of social

upheaval and civil disorder in the 1960s.

Allport was deeply involved in defense-related war research during World War II. While other academics left their posts to work for Government agencies after Pearl Harbor, Allport stayed at Harvard, giving Defense Seminars, developing defense-related research projects, and creating a clearinghouse for war-related psychological research. One of Allport's biggest efforts during the war was the *Boston Herald* "Rumor Clinic," a newspaper column which refuted popular rumors and educated the public on the their pernicious effect ("Boston makes war on rumor," 1942, September). Allport ran the "Rumor Clinic" with a student, Robert Knapp, who was in charge of the Division of Propaganda Research of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety. At first, the rumors discussed in the "Rumor Clinic" column were provided by "official agencies" and by *Herald* readers; after a while, though, Knapp and Allport supplemented this rumor flow by appointing 300 "morale wardens," who reported rumors directly to the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety. These "morale wardens" also were responsible for posting the "Rumor Clinic" article on local bulletin boards (Faye, 2007). The majority of rumors they addressed concerned government corruption, wartime rationing, mistreatment of soldiers, and the imminence of victory or defeat. The rumor rebuttals were signed by various government officials and experts, as well as the Rumor Clinic editorial board, on which Allport and Knapp sat (ibid.).

Allport corresponded with the OWI in the early part of 1942, seeking collaboration and funding for his rumor control efforts. The OWI declined these entreaties because

it was felt that the “Rumor Clinic” risked spreading rumors. The OWI also wanted to control rumor efforts centrally. Allport, however, was a passionate advocate of the rumor-scotching approach. He felt that refuting rumors was necessary to counter Axis propaganda, and developed guidelines for rumor control as a counter-propaganda effort (Faye, 2007). A local effort at the beginning of the war, Allport and Knapp’s Rumor Clinic work spread when *Reader’s Digest* covered it in a story in September, 1942. By October, they had received over 150 requests for help in setting up clinics across the U.S. Eventually, clinics were established in places such as San Francisco, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Washington and Montreal (Faye, 2007).

After the war, Allport published *Psychology of Rumor*, merchandising his wartime experience and burnishing his already formidable reputation as a social psychologist. The book would be cited as the “definitive” work on the subject even decades later (Knopf, 2006, p. xxvi). Published in 1947, the book draws upon Allport’s data and experience from the war, along with laboratory experiments about how rumors spread and how information changes when it moves from person to person. The book is a social scientific treatise on the classification, cause, and spread of rumor, and posits a “basic law of rumor” that they spread based on their importance to the listener and the ambiguity of the information the rumor contains.

While the focus of *Psychology of Rumor* is to analyze how rumors spread, the book also discusses their ability to trigger riots. “In no case can we claim that hearsay is the sole or original cause of a riot, yet it seems always to play an important ancillary role,” Allport wrote. “In fact, the evidence at hand is so convincing that we may

advance it as a law of social psychology that *no riot ever occurs without rumors to incite, accompany, and intensify the violence*” (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 193).

As the title of his “Rumor Clinic” during the War implies, Allport thought rumors were much like micro-organisms that made society sick:

Within the social organism the bacilli of rumor are always active ... The fever burns most dangerously when the health of the social organism is least able to withstand its ravages. Wars, riots, epidemics, disasters, all damaging enough in themselves, become still more disastrous when the complications of rumor are added. (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 193)

Like Lee and Humphrey, Allport blamed these “bacilli” for mob hysteria. “During the heat of a riot rumors fly faster than ever, but in this frantic period their character reflects acute fanaticism,” he wrote (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 195-6). This danger of rumors is acute enough, according to Allport, to justify government efforts to track and contain them:

Rumors may serve as a dependable warning to alert law-enforcement agencies, who without delay can and should take decisive steps toward controlling a disturbed population that is rapidly reaching a pitch of excitement and hostility where it can no longer control itself. (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 197)

Early in the war, Allport accused the enemy of using rumors to sow fear and dissension. But over time, his views became more nuanced—particularly in regard to race-related rumors. In an article published right after the war, Allport posited that anti-Black rumors existed because:

White rumor-spreaders find their feelings of economic and social insecurity to some extent explained by these stories. Suffering a vague anxiety, they justify their jitters by pointing to Negro aggression, and derive a melancholy consolation in alerting one another to the menace. (Allport & Postman, 1946-1947, Winter)

In the article, Allport suggests that rumors about African American aggression, disloyalty, and criminality were a way of Whites alleviating guilt about Black oppression (Allport & Postman, 1946-1947, Winter). It was not this nuanced analysis, however, that would have an impact on the government policy in the 1960s. Rather, it was Allport's assertions of the link between rumors and riots that would help justify dozens of rumor clinics across the country—clinics which practiced an assortment of surveillance techniques on Black citizens.

In 1968, a year after Allport's book was reprinted for the first time, an article in the International Association of Police Chiefs' newsletter appeared which promoted the use of rumor control centers as a way of heading off and controlling racial unrest. Reviewing previous rumor control efforts, the authors wrote that "the experience gained in World War II and the guidelines developed by these and later undertakings can be adapted to local conditions" (L. Williams & Erchak, 1968, May, p. 30). Rumor control centers, born during a war against fascism, would be recast during an era of violence in American cities.

Race "Riots" in the 1960s

Race-related violence is such an integral part of U.S. history, one historian aptly calls it “as American as apple pie” (Mitchell, 1970, p. 1). Indeed, the history of racial violence in the United States is abundant enough to warrant a two-volume encyclopedia of American race “riots”¹ which runs more than a thousand pages long (Rucker & Upton, 2002). No major period in the country has been free of racial violence. Lynchings, mob attacks, clashes between racial groups, riot-related looting and property destruction—each has had its own heyday as the emblematic racial violence of its time.

Attacks by Whites on Blacks, the most common type of racial violence in American history, started well before the country’s independence. In 1741, White mobs, citing insubordination, attacked and killed African sailors at port, burning some at the stake and leaving some others hanging in chains “to swing, blacken and rot in the summer air” (Headley, 1882, quoted in Knopf, 2006). White mobs attacked slaves and freedmen throughout the antebellum period, often in response to suspected insurrection or insubordination. After the Civil War, organized lynching, occurring mainly but not exclusively in the South, imposed a brutal regime of terror on the lives of Black Americans (Tuskegee Institute, 1947, cited in Mitchell, 1970). In the early 20th century, a time in which millions of Blacks migrated to Northern cities, labor issues sparked racial violence. Most of

¹ Note: The term “riot” connotes wanton and wild destruction, and has much different implications than alternatives such as “civil disorder”, “insurrection”, or “rebellion”. Like the term “black” in describing African Americans, however, it is the most commonly used term now and during the time period discussed in this chapter, and is consistent with the primary and secondary information used herein. For that reason I will (reluctantly) use the term riot, even when arguing that the riots themselves should be seen as political activity protesting social and economic oppression.

the time, these incidents were caused by resentment over an influx of Black labor into industries previously dominated by Whites. One of the bloodiest race riots in U.S. history took place in East St. Louis in 1918, where 57 Black people were killed and hundreds injured when the police, aided by a White mob and the National Guard, raided a Black community, shooting and burning indiscriminately (Archer, 1974). During and immediately after World War II, labor issues continued to spark racial violence, with particularly serious violence occurring in Detroit, Harlem and Los Angeles. While each event was different, throughout history these incidents have generally yielded the same outcome: disproportionate Black casualties, and the destruction of Black communities (Mitchell, 1970).

Race-related violence again became a prominent national issue in the mid-1960s. In some ways, this period of racial violence was unique. Instead of the interracial clashes between Whites and Blacks that had characterized previous racial violence, the violence in the 1960s mainly took place within Black communities. And while many would die or be injured as a result, property, not people, was the main target of the 1960s riots. As in the past, however, Black communities would bear the brunt of the destruction.

The United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, outlawing discrimination in employment and public places—a major victory for the Civil Rights movement. But, two weeks later, in New York City, a White police officer shot and killed a 15-year old Black boy, triggering a riot. For two days, Black

Harlem residents burned property, assaulted White bystanders, and looted stores. Despite the political efforts of some Black leaders to quell the violence, riots spread across the river to the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. By July 23, the toll in New York City stood at one dead, over 100 injured, and millions of dollars in property damage (Rucker & Upton, 2002).

The same week, upstate in Rochester, New York, the arrest of a Black teenager outside a dance club led to another riot. Angry Blacks stoned the chief of police, and looted and burned the Black neighborhood. To reassert control, Governor Nelson Rockefeller sent in 1,000 National Guard troops. Violence spread to other states: a month later, serious rioting erupted in Philadelphia after a Black woman, apparently drunk and upset, was dragged from her car by two White policeman and arrested at a traffic stop. A crowd gathered, stoned the police, then looted and burned stores (Rucker & Upton, 2002).

Violence worsened the following year. In August 1965, some of the decade's worst race rioting took place in the Watts section of Los Angeles, triggered by another confrontation between a citizen and the police. On a hot afternoon, the arrest of a Black motorist by White police officers drew an angry crowd. The incident led to a prolonged episode of arson, assaults on police and bystanders, and the looting of hundreds of stores (Murphy & Cohen, 1965). Watts was one of the worst riots in nearly 50 years, leaving 34 dead, over 1,000 injured, more than 4,000 arrested, and tens of millions of dollars in property damage (Fogelson, 1971).

As a result of the riots, President Lyndon Johnson asked J. Edgar Hoover, the Director of the FBI, to expand riot control training at the FBI National Academy. In 1967, one year after Allport's *The Psychology of Rumor* was republished, the FBI released a manual titled *Prevention and Control of Mobs and Riots*. The 111-page manual was endorsed by the U.S. Army and nine municipal police departments, and was created with assistance from the U.S. Civil Rights Division (Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Dept. of Justice, & Hoover, 1967; O'Reilly, 1991). The book is a comprehensive guidebook for authorities dealing with riot conditions, and contains detailed information about issues such as the relative advantages of different kinds riot control weapons, formations, and other control mechanisms. Sections in the manual included "Crowds and Their Behavior," "The Nature of Crowds," "Tactical Use of Chemical Agents," and "Practical Measures for Police Control of Mobs and Riots."

Among the strategic and tactical riot control guidance, the manual discusses the role of rumors in triggering riots. Citing Allport's claims without directly attributing them, the manual asserts that rumors can whip up mob hysteria:

Rumor plays a major part in crystallizing ... public opinion. In fact, some writers go so far as to state that no riot ever takes place without a build-up through rumor.... A rumor can often be the spark that sets off the explosion. It is circulated rapidly and, through distortion, it grows in its ugliness at each recitation. Rumors are also significant during the actual rioting by helping to sustain the excitement. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, et al., 1967, p. 25)

During World War II, the OWI used rumor control as a method of gauging public

opinion and morale. *Prevention and Control of Mobs and Riots* suggests a similar method of monitoring the public. The manual observes that “the circulation of rumors is one of the most reliable indicators of the temper of the times” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, et al., 1967, p. 30), and asserts that “if the police collect and analyze these rumors in a community, they will be taking advantage of a sensitive index for the state of group hostility and thus they can help themselves forestall violence” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, et al., 1967, p. 26). The manual also suggests that rumors be monitored *during* riots as a way of controlling riots that have already started. This is discussed in a section called “Intelligence Gathered by a Law Enforcement Agency,” which outlines the kind of information that should be gathered during the control of violent disturbances:

Reports of conditions should be made periodically to the individual in charge and should include such information as: 1. Whether the disturbance is increasing or has lessened in intensity.... 4. Circulation and nature of rumors.... 10. Any conversation that might be overheard, indicating the degree of violence that may be expected.” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, et al., 1967, p. 35)

The manual also suggests telling the “truth” through mass media as a “countermeasure” to rumors—in other words, the kind of rumor scotching advocated by Cantril, Allport and others (Federal Bureau of Investigation, et al., 1967). These two kinds of rumor control efforts, rumor monitoring and rumor-scotching, would be widely used during the race riots several years later.

In 1966, riots erupted in Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Omaha, Dayton, San Francisco, Atlanta and scores of other cities. One year later, in 1967, violence

reached a crescendo, with the worst race riots the country had seen in 100 years. There were serious riots in Cincinnati, Buffalo, Newark, and Milwaukee. Riots in Detroit took a particularly high toll—43 dead, over 1,000 injured, over 7,000 arrested, and over 50 million dollars in property damage. According to a Government commission, in 1967 alone there were 164 racial “disturbances” affecting every section of the country, with the worst violence hitting the Northeast and Midwest. Eight disturbances were serious enough to involve the U.S. military (Rossi, 1970).

In July of 1967, with riots threatening cities across the country, President Lyndon Johnson created The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to study the causes of the 1967 race riots and to make recommendations for preventing them in the future. Called the “Kerner Commission” after its chair, Otto Kerner, Governor of Illinois, the commission was mainly made up of conservative politicians and business leaders. Out of eleven members, two were Black, both of whom were considered moderate and “respectable” civil rights leaders (Lipsky & Olsen, 1976; Rossi, 1970).

Over the course of seven months, the Kerner commission collected and analyzed a wide range of data, conducted hundreds of interviews, and engaged social scientists to conduct numerous public opinion surveys. In February 1968, the Kerner commission released its report. In strong, direct, and ominous language, the report says that racism put the entire society in jeopardy: “This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—

separate and unequal ... Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life: they now threaten the future of every American.” While acknowledging historical and social factors, the team of conservative men mainly condemned White America, not Black ghetto residents, for the riots and racial discord ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 1). The report argues that Whites, not Blacks, are responsible for the violence:

White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II. Among the ingredients of this mixture are: *Pervasive discrimination and segregation.... Black in-migration and white exodus ... [and] The black ghettos.* ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 10)

For the latter, White people are implicated. “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it” ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 2).

The Kerner report focuses its recommendations, such as the creation of 3 million new jobs, squarely on changing the underlying social problems that it said led to riots. But in one short passage, and a slightly longer one in a report “Supplement” that was not included in all editions of the report, the report discusses the role of rumors in contributing to the worsening of racial tension and violence. In one

passage, the report asserts that:

rumors significantly aggravated tension and disorder in more than 65 percent of disorders studied by the commission. Sometimes, as in Tampa and New Haven, rumor served as a spark which turned an incident into a civil disorder. Elsewhere, notably Detroit and Newark, even where they were not precipitating or motivating factors, inflaming rumors made the job of police and community leaders more difficult. ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 326-7)

The report calls "persistent rumors and inadequate information" one of five "inseparable" factors in escalating tension that included crowded ghettos, youth on the streets, hostility to the police, and delay in police response ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 172).

The Kerner commission recommended that law enforcement use rumor control techniques in riot situations. Consistent with the FBI manual on mob and riot control, the Kerner report says that the police should monitor and "neutralize" rumors during riots. The report recommends establishing an "intelligence system" to "provide police and other public officials with reliable information that may help prevent the outbreak of a disorder and to institute effective control measures in the event a riot erupts." This "intelligence system" should include "machinery for neutralizing rumors, and enabling Negro leaders and residents to obtain the facts. Create special rumor details to collect, evaluate and dispel rumors that may lead to a civil disorder" ("Report of the National Advisory

Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968), p. 18). The report also says that “the harmful effect of rumors can be offset if police, public officials, and community leaders quickly and effectively circulate the facts—through the news media and even via loudspeaker trucks at the scene of violent incidents” (“Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 326-7).

The Kerner Report overwhelmingly focuses on White racism as the underlying cause of race riots, and material relating to rumors covers only a few of the 425 pages of the report itself. But the rumor control recommendations were the measures that inspired action. Perhaps the scope of institutional racism and the problems it presented were so overwhelming that cities and states instead chose to focus on something that seemed controllable. As one analysis of the issue contends:

[the] causal judgment of the Commission [that White racism was to blame for violence], as well as its promising recommendations for programs to alleviate the plight of ghetto residents, did not appear to result in massive public support for the verdict or in determined political efforts to implement its proposals. By stressing the pervasive and insidious effects of attitudinal racism—the stress emphasized in the mass media—the Commission perhaps confronted the white public and governing officials with a problem that was so overwhelming and so amorphous that it would have paralyzed the national will for action, even if other restricting factors had not been present.” (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 25)

FBI: “Listening Posts” and Rumor-Mongering

While the Kerner commission was preparing its indictment of White racism, and

developing sweeping recommendations for social programs to reduce urban violence, the FBI was making its own plans, including extensive surveillance in Black communities and infiltration and disruption of Black organizations. J. Edgar Hoover's FBI had targeted the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s, and conducted surveillance, into the 1960's, on movement leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. In the later part of that decade, the Bureau's extended its efforts to the Black Power movement. Its efforts included aspects of rumor control, such as recruiting civilians to report on what they overheard in day-to-day conversations, and the spreading of false rumors to sow dissension and break morale among Black militant organizations.

As urban riots became more of a widespread problem, the U.S. Government began to suspect that they were being organized and coordinated by militant groups. Consequently, in September, 1967, two months after Johnson ordered the formation of the Kerner Commission, Attorney General Ramsey Clark wrote to J. Edgar Hoover with an urgent directive:

There persists ... a widespread belief that there is more organized activity in the riots than we presently know about.... In these circumstances, we must make certain that every attempt is being made to get all information bearing upon these problems; to take every step possible to determine whether the rioting is pre-planned or organized; and, if so, to determine the identity of the people and interests involved; and to deter this activity by prompt and vigorous legal action.

As a part of the broad investigation which must necessarily be conducted ... sources or informants in black nationalist organizations, SNCC and other less publicized groups should be developed and expanded to determine the size and purpose of these groups and their relationship to other groups, and also to determine

the whereabouts of persons who might be involved in instigating riot activity in violation of federal law. ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968, p. 129)

In response to this and other requests, the FBI initiated the "Ghetto Informant Program" in October of 1967 to gather intelligence in Black communities. The program included "Ghetto Listening Posts", made up of "any individual who resides in a ghetto type area... or ... who frequent[s] ghetto areas on a regular basis" and could overhear conversations and report them to the FBI. Similar to the "listening post" concept that had been developed by the OWI during WWII, the bureau searched for recruits among the people that had the most exposure to casual conversation. Hence prospects for the grass-roots network of "listening posts" included employees of taverns, bars, and barber shops, as well as people employed as taxi drivers and bill collectors. Once recruited, they were directed to report "changes in the attitude in the Negro community toward the white community" and "sentiments and feelings of individuals" living in Black communities (O'Reilly, 1991).

At first, the listening posts or "ghetto informants" were not given specific assignments; rather, they were supposed to report anything they overheard in the course of their daily interactions (Moore, 1972, cited in "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968). Several years later, however, these informants were sent to attend public meetings held by "extremists," identify people that were distributing "extremist" literature, and even to frequent "Afro-American type bookstores ... for the

purpose of determining if militant extremist literature is available therein and, if so to identify the owners, operators, and clientele of those stores” (SAC memorandum, 1968, cited in "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968). By 1969, there were 4,067 ghetto informants. Three years later, the number had grown to 7,402 ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968).

In August of 1986, the FBI extended COINTELPRO, a program begun in 1956 to create factionalism within the American Communist Party, to target two Black militant groups, the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. Modeled after programs to identify and disrupt foreign intelligence programs on U.S. soil, and employing techniques of military psychological warfare, COINTELPRO (an acronym for “counterintelligence program) was retooled in order to disrupt and “neutralize” “Black Nationalist Hate Groups” ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968). From the outset, COINTELPRO used a variety of tactics to sow factionalism and even violence within organizations deemed dangerous by the FBI. This included using “infiltrators [who] were cast in the role of agents provocateurs for purposes of fomenting disruption: spreading rumors to sow seeds of distrust among organizational members and exacerbate tensions or disputes within and between dissident groups” (Churchill, 2000, p. 3). Other tactics included mailing anonymous letters with disinformation and rumors about members of Black

organizations; fomenting violence among rival Black gangs; and even deliberately breaking up marriages and other personal relationships.

COINTELPRO operations were executed by local FBI field offices and used a wide variety of counter-intelligence tactics. In one case, an informant was used to “raise the question” among his associates about whether an unmarried, 30-year old group leader was homosexual. The FBI’s local field office in San Diego believed that this accusation would “rapidly become a rumor” and “could have serious results concerning the ability and effectiveness of [the person’s] leadership” (“Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report],” 1968). The FBI also attempted to disrupt personal relationships in order to undermine morale in Black organizations. One tactic used repeatedly was sending anonymous letters to women saying that their husbands or boyfriends were having affairs. In one case, an FBI agent visited the wife of a Black Panther leader and showed her pictures that purported to show him in compromising positions with other women. In another case, the FBI’s St. Louis field office boasted that the separation of a married couple was the “tangible result” of their anonymous letter. “This matrimonial stress and strain should cause her to function much less effectively in ACTION. While the letter sent ... was probably not the sole cause of this separation, it certainly contributed very strongly,” the field office wrote in memorandum (“Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report],” 1968).

More than simply breaking up marriages, COINTELPRO was effective in causing disruption in the major Black organizations in the late 1960s. One campaign of

anonymous letters was designed to “create further dissension in the ranks of the BPP [Black Panther Party]” and exacerbate a “gang war” between the BPP and a rival organization ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968). This effort, according to one FBI official, resulted in “shootings, beatings, and a high degree of unrest” ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968). Another target was the Nation of Islam, which also became rife with factionalism partly as a result of FBI efforts. As one historian writes, “Nation of Islam factionalism didn’t just happen. It had been developed by deliberate Bureau actions, through infiltration and the ‘sparking of acrimonious debates within the organization’, rumor-mongering, and other tactics designed to foster internal disputes” (Wolf).

COINTELPRO was ended as a centralized operation in 1971 after stolen internal documents revealed some of its activities. The Ghetto Informant Program lasted until July of 1973, when concerns over the cost, value and “propriety” of the program led the FBI to shut it down ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968).

The Emergence and Spread of Rumor Control Centers

The first rumor control center established in response to race riots is believed to have been established before the Kerner report, the Ghetto Informant Program, and COINTELPRO. It was called the “Watts Communicator,” and was set up in 1966, one year after serious rioting there. Watts Communicator was a telephone

center which answered calls and calmed the fears of L.A. citizens that violence was going to return to the city. In the brief time it operated, the “Watts Communicator” fielded 10,000 calls (Ponting, 1973, p. 61). A few months after the founding of the Watts Communicator, Chicago’s “Rumor Central” was established after the Police Department, Mayor’s office and Chicago Committee for Human Relations (CCHR) were overwhelmed by citizens calls about impending violence in that city (*Re: “The establishment of RUMOR CENTRAL – A special public telephone service designed to operate during times of racial tension” [Memorandum to Mayors’ Offices, Human Relations Commissions, and Interested Agencies, from the Chicago Commission on Human Relations]*, n.d.). Several other cities established rumor control centers in 1967, employing staff or volunteers to answer phone calls and respond to questions from nervous citizens.

On April 4, 1968, two weeks after the release of the Kerner report, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, triggering riots across the country. Two days after his death, in the midst of the emerging riots, Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh appeared on local radio and television stations to address the city. He appealed to the citizens of Detroit to remain peaceful and warned citizens of the danger of rumors—as Roosevelt had done in the midst of national crisis two decades before:

Fear is fueled by rumors and rumors have been rampant from Grand Boulevard to Grosse Pointe.... Victimized by rumors, the citizens of Detroit—both Negro and White—are arming themselves

in unprecedented numbers ... There could be no more tragic occurrence than if this city were plunged into conflict based on a wholly untrue irresponsible rumor or story. For this reason, I have today directed that the City's Commission on Community Relations establish and maintain a Rumor Control Center ... Each rumor will be checked out, the true facts established and an effort made to dispel the rumor before it can do any more damage. (Cavanaugh, 1968)

While Detroit was establishing its RCC at this time, other cities which already had RCCs in place saw a spike in phone activity. Chicago's Rumor Central, for example, received 40,000 calls (Chicago Commission on Human Relations, 1968).

Two months after the Detroit Mayor's speech, the Community Relations Service of the U.S. Department of Justice organized a conference titled "The Value of Establishing Rumor Control Centers" and held it in Chicago to capitalize on Rumor Central's experience. The purpose of the conference was to spread the word about the value of RCCs in preventing and controlling riots and "to enable existing rumor control centers to improve their techniques." Representatives from 90 cities, 35 states and the District of Columbia attended the conference, which included directors of municipal human relations agencies, police officials, and social workers from private, local and national agencies (Community Relations Service U.S. Department of Justice, 1968).

The conference was an important clearinghouse for information about RCCs. Participants toured Rumor Central and spent two days hearing panel discussions and debating issues (Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Marks,

Rogers, Human Relations Agencies, & Interested Persons, p. 1). The Kerner report's findings on the relationships between rumors and riots was repeatedly cited at the conference, and the commission's assertion that 68% of riots were triggered by rumors was quoted and surrounded by asterisks on the first page of the conference report. The conference was an important part of the development of rumor control centers: five years later, a study of 36 RCCs operating at that time found that nearly a third had attended the Chicago conference (Ponting, 1973, p. 62).

After the riots following King's assassination, the summer of 1968 was relatively quiet, and riots ebbed substantially in subsequent years—slowing the growth of RCCs. It is impossible to be sure exactly how many RCCs were established in this entire period, but a rough estimation can be made. In 1970, the National Association of Police Community Relations Officers (NAPCRO) sent a survey to 45 American cities—every U.S. city with a population of more than 300,000. Of the 38 that responded, 26 had an RCC (National Association of Police Community Relations Officers, 1970, June 30). It is likely that this underestimates the total number of RCCs. Another study found that five centers were established *after* the NAPCRO study was complete and seven were established the same year of the survey (Ponting, 1973). It is also possible that some RCCs may have shut down by 1970, and others may have existed in cities that were non-responsive to the survey. Finally, there were RCCs in smaller cities not surveyed by NAPCRO, including Omaha, Nebraska (*[Folder "Correspondence"]*), Shelby, Tennessee (L. Williams & Erchak, 1968, May),

Cincinnati, Ohio (*[Folder 44]*), and Portland, Oregon (*Rumor control: Information material for the period June 20, 1969 to August 6, 1969 [handwritten on top is "Portland, Oregon"]*, c. 1969). Based on this information, we can surmise that there were probably 35 to 42 rumor control centers operating in cities across the country in the late 1960's and early 1970's, covering a combined population of many millions of Americans.

RCC Operation

While it is impossible to find detailed information about most of the rumor control centers that existed, there is enough available information to indicate how at least some of them functioned. Two surveys, the NAPRCO survey and a doctoral dissertation on organizational behavior by John R. Ponting, give us general data about the scope and operation of RCCs. The Chicago rumor control conference report captures some of the dialogue among attendees of that conference. Archives, which contain rumor collection sheets, memoranda, and other correspondence, were preserved for three RCCs: the Seattle Rumor Control Center (at the University of Washington Library) the Detroit Rumor Control Center (at Wayne State University), and the Chicago Rumor Center (at the Chicago Municipal Library). Together, these collections comprise more than 5,000 pages of documents. In addition, information about many RCCs is obtainable through newspaper and other media reports. While the data have some limitations, the evidence is consistent enough to allow for generalizations about the purpose of RCCs, their organization, how they operated, and whom

they served.

Rumor control centers were set up to collect rumors, scotch them, and otherwise provide a source of information to nervous citizens during periods of rumored or actual racial violence. Some centers had other purposes as well. Ponting conducted interviews with more than 30 RCCs across the country. He found that:

Almost all the centers studied shared the same official purpose: to investigate rumors and to gather and disseminate accurate information so as to stop rumors. Variations or elaborations on this included alleviating the fears and anxieties of callers, providing factual information which is unrelated to rumors (e.g. about bus rerouting) during time of racial disorder, monitoring race relations as to serve as a “barometer” for community tensions, or even simply to reduce the volume of traffic through the switchboards of other city government offices. (Ponting, 1973, p. 55-6.)

The setup of Chicago’s Rumor Central, a model for many other RCCs, was fairly simple. In a memorandum, the CCHR wrote that:

Rumor Central consists of ten telephones connected on a sequential hunt system, personnel to man the telephones, a good system of communication with the Police and Fire Departments and various other private and public agencies with staff in the field, and two men to check out rumors and receive incoming reports from these departments.

The center was also equipped “two separate phones to be used exclusively by research staff responsible for receiving police reports and checking rumors,” a “street map of the city, visible to all phones, covered by clear plastic, on which verified incidents can be recorded,” a blackboard, note pads, and “rumor check

out forms for telephone personnel to give contact research staff requesting that he check out a rumor” (Re: *“The establishment of RUMOR CENTRAL – A special public telephone service designed to operate during times of racial tension”* [Memorandum to Mayors’ Offices, Human Relations Commissions, and Interested Agencies, from the Chicago Commission on Human Relations], n.d.).

Rumor control centers were created, and aligned, with different kinds of organizations. At the Chicago conference on rumor control centers, participants debated whether they should be set up within police departments or operate independently in the community. There was concern over rumor center alignment with police departments because participants thought it would damage RCC credibility. Roscoe Nix, Executive Director of the Maryland Commission on Community relations, put it this way:

If you use the police department solely to run the rumor control center, it will not work because the inner city dweller does not trust the police and will not confide in them. A rumor control center which is not able to check the veracity of rumors is ineffective, wasted motion. (Nix quoted in (Community Relations Service U.S. Department of Justice, 1968, p. 10)

Despite this debate, police departments were by far the most common organization to establish an RCC—followed by the news media and the Mayor’s office (Ponting, 1973). But most RCCs that were not based in police departments were still in constant communication with the police and mayor. Ponting found that it was “virtually universally mentioned” that the RCCs he interviewed received their information from local police departments. One RCC worker told

him that:

we are a sort of team as far as the Police Department is concerned. That is, we are not trying to fight them, contradict, discredit [them, or] support people who biased about the activity of the Police Department.... For some hard-to-explain reason I would consider this type of an operation [an RCC] as being akin to police more than being on the other side.” (quoted in Ponting, 1973, p. 68-9)

Other evidence is consistent on this point. The Detroit RCC had dedicated phone lines for both the Mayor’s office and Police department (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20; *[Undated article from the Michigan Chronicle]*, n.d.) and a daily report of rumor activity was prepared for the Mayor (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 4). The Seattle Rumor Center was partially funded by the police department, and designed as a “a quasi-independent group but with close liaison with the Mayor’s office, the Police Department, the Fire Department and other units of the City government as well as groups within the community” (Jensen, 1968, June 4). Daily reports from the Seattle RCC went to the Mayor, the chief of police, and the security office of the Seattle School System (Henderson, 1969, January 2). In Seattle, one community organization resigned from the committee charged with establishing the rumor center, partly because of the RCCs planned close alignment with the police (Gautier, 1968, May 24).

While all rumor control centers fielded telephone calls of citizens reporting rumors, some had staff go into the community to gather rumors—the kind of “feel of the pulse” via informants that Lee, Humphrey and Cantril advocated. The operating procedure for the Seattle Rumor Center stipulated that “when

civil disorder occurs, the director, or an assistant, immediately is dispatched to the area” to monitor activity there (Henderson, 1969, January 2). The Rumor Center also surveyed Seattle residents with a questionnaire “to help anticipate problem areas for the City” ([*Document “Call Summary June 30 through October 3”*], c. 1969-70). In this way, the Seattle RCC was a hub for different kinds of intelligence-gathering.

The Detroit Rumor Center was a prong in a larger effort of surveillance of Black communities, developed a year before the establishment of the RCC itself. In early 1967, the Detroit Commission on Community Relations developed an “Early Warning System” and “year-round incident control system” called “Project Sweep”. Project Sweep employed staff to “provide a continuous sampling of opinion and report from ten major areas.” These areas were chosen according to criteria which included: the number of unemployed youth, the number of parentless youth, lack of facilities and evening and weekend programs, rate of juvenile delinquency and youth crime, and “areas of high mobility”—areas where “teenagers tend to be without established patterns of socialization.” These criteria, while objective-sounding, justified targeting Black communities. Project Sweep was designed to funnel intelligence about these Black communities directly to the police and Mayor’s office, via community organizers and other groups characterized on a internal flow chart as “Eyes and Ears” and “Listening Posts” (R. Marks, 1967, May 25).

The actual operation of the Detroit RCC, established in 1968, was given to the

Field Investigation Division of the Detroit Commission on Community Relations. According to an internal memo, this was the most appropriate place for it given that Division's expertise in gathering "intelligence" on groups of troublemakers. A memo states that:

The Field Investigation Division of the Detroit Commission on Community Relations has traditionally functioned as an investigative and information gathering unit focusing on rumor and incident control. Intelligence data on extremist groups is maintained in the usual course of business. Incidents having racial overtones are also investigated and evaluated by this unit. Primary responsibility for the operation of the Rumor Control Center was given to this division of the agency because of its experience. (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 2)

While the Detroit RCC was ostensibly there to calm rumors, the staff at the Detroit RCC was trained to gather intelligence for the Mayor and for law enforcement. Personnel fielding calls at the Detroit Rumor Center were directed to "get as much information as possible, including a copy of any literature being passed out if available and explain that it will be given to the field staff for further investigation" (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 2). This field staff would "conduct on-the-scene investigation of significant rumors asserted to the fact and relay relevant information to the Rumor Control Center for evaluation" (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 4). Municipal agencies, including the Detroit Parks and Recreation Department, were assigned to become the "eyes and ears" of the Rumor Control Center.... [to] act as 'field investigators' [who] can be contacted by CCR staff to verify and check incidents reported and inquired about by the general public" (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 5). Telephone staff asked callers

to send in street literature, such as pamphlets and posters, to understand the mood on the street and anticipate demonstrations and incidents (Jones, 1968, April 2). In addition, during emergencies, the Detroit police department assigned a police officer around the clock to communicate with the Rumor Control Center—ostensibly to provide information about incidents. Combined with the daily report that went to the Mayor, the Detroit Rumor Control Center was well organized to fulfill a surveillance function over Detroit's Black citizens.

There were other RCCs which used the information they gathered to spur investigations. The Oklahoma RCC asked telephone staff to note the name of the person calling in and the "Nature of the Rumor to be Checked Out or Information Needed" ([Document titled "*Information and instruction for Rumor Control volunteers*" – Oklahoma City Community Relations Commission], n.d.). An article in *The Police Chief*, the publication of the International Association of the Chiefs of Police, noted:

Other rumor control centers might be wise to follow the example of the one in Cleveland which takes an active role in the control of disorders. Simple rumor control without any efforts at a more active intervention is rather arbitrarily singling out an integral part of the larger problem. Following an example found in Cleveland, a worker in a rumor control center might respond to a typical inquiry with, "Yes, there is a crowd gathered on Fifth Street, but it is small and calm." But he would not stop at that as is now typical. Instead, he would go on to make sure that the crowd remained "small and calm" by contacting a response force which has been pre-designated to help control such gatherings. Whether this response force consists of the police or of influential local citizens or others to help depends on the situation at hand. In Cleveland, the response force consists of both community leaders and municipal employees and they utilize city vehicles to move to the scene. (L. Williams &

Erchak, 1968, May)

RCCs also disseminated official information to the public. In Detroit, rumor center staff sent copies of a Mayor's speech to callers. Callers were also instructed to "if possible to convert the caller from believing the rumor as 'fact', to recognizing its source and questioning the reason for its being spread by this source" (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 2). Staffers were provided with boilerplate responses to rumors, such as "Riots are not inevitable and no one is able to predict what will happen in the future. The City of Detroit is prepared to handle any situation that occurs, and we believe that the public good cannot be served by repeating rumors such as these" (ibid.). In Seattle, the RCC provided two-hour training sessions that promoted the rumor center and educated the public about rumor theory, using experiments closely resembling those in Gordon Allport's book to show how rumors distort messages (*Training document*], n.d.).

RCC Clientele

During World War II, the race-related rumors gathered by the OWI mainly consisted of white fears of African American aggression or insurrection, best exemplified by the widespread "Eleanor Rumor" in which Black people organized work stoppages and other disruptions. Focusing on the South during this period, one sociologist categorized rumors passed among Whites into three groups: "rumors that the 'Negro will take over' the affairs of the white man," "rumors and

stories of the Negroes taking over white women,” and “rumors of riots and uprisings, of the purchase of ice picks, knives, and guns by the Negroes” (Odum, 1943/1997, p. 54-5). This period was in no way unique. In her book about the role of rumors in race riots, Terry Knopf concludes that throughout U.S. history:

Virtually all the rumors examined ... have centered on a theme of plots, or, more generally speaking, threats made against the people spreading the rumors—i.e. whites. Reports that slaves planned to burn down the city of New York; alleged meetings to encourage slaves to cut their masters’ throats; predictions of more runaway slaves, John Brown-type raids and slave insurrections; charges of Slave Power conspiracy—all these examples underscore the threatening quality of the rumors.” (Knopf, 2006, p. 21)

This pattern held in the 1960s. Because of this, rumor centers, whose mission was to prevent riots, ended up as organizations to provide information to, and calm the fears of, Whites. Put another way, RCCs were organizations made up mostly of Whites dispelling the fears of other Whites. Ponting found that of the 28 RCCs that he could classify, 23 were “oriented (in terms of providing services) towards crisis-time clientele comprised mainly ... dominant group [white] members” (Ponting, 1973, p. 67-8). The “overwhelming number of RCCS [were] oriented primarily to a white clientele,” Ponting explains, demonstrated by the “often-cited example wherein the RCC calms a caller who wants to know if it is true that Blacks attacks some whites, so he can take retaliatory actions if it is true” (ibid.).

Ponting is not the only researcher to observe this. Terry Knopf writes:

Rumor control centers serviced the white community primarily;

relatively few calls were received from blacks. The Chicago Riot Study Committee found that the city's Rumor Central, which handled some 40,000 calls at the time of King disturbance, provided "little service" to the residents of the riot areas, adding: "In the opinions of the employees of the commission [on Human Relations], most of those who telephoned Rumor Central were white, not Negro." Writing about the Urban League's rumor control center in Washington, D.C., which opened up during the King disorders, columnist William Raspberry noted: "Most of the calls then were from the suburbs and the callers mainly wanted to know whether it was true that the rioters were headed that way, whether specific acts of sabotage were in the works or was it true that snipers were at such and such location." (Knopf, 2006, p. 310)

A particularly telling example comes from the Chicago Rumor Center.

One night Rumor Central received an unusually large number of calls from one Chicago neighborhood. Residents of the area reported that there was to be a march on the white neighborhood and that their neighbors were beginning to evacuate. Not only was there no trouble in the area, but considering the geographic location, it was highly unlikely that there would be. After thoroughly checking the situation, telephone personnel began requesting that each caller please report back to the source of his information and help to disseminate the truth. We then reported the extent of the rumor to the Police Department, and they began a house to house canvas of the neighborhood assuring residents they were in no danger. (Chicago Commission on Human Relations, 1968)

The report of police officers going door to door, reassuring White residents that there was no danger of a Black invasion of protesters, is revealing in terms of the priorities of law enforcement at this time.

This pattern was evident in Detroit as well. A Rumor Center staffer observed that “callers were suburban whites fearful of impending black hostility carried to white communities” (Rosenthal, 1979, p. 270). A memorandum analyzing the nearly 1,000 calls following Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination concluded that:

These calls came mainly from the suburbs surrounding Detroit (mainly white communities). A recurring rumor was of the speculative type illustrating the fear which had been generated in the white communities. The rumor, in essence, indicated that Negroes planned to systematically kill off children in white neighborhoods (R. V. Marks, 1968, March 20, p. 6).

The fear among Whites manifested in a number of ways, most reflecting racist attitudes. A rumor that White children were being kidnapped and castrated was common in Detroit, and fears that Blacks would invade White neighborhoods led to a five-fold increase in gun registrations in one predominantly White suburb (ibid.). This fear fueled calls to rumor centers. One analyst observed:

The callers need to have their fears allayed. There was a fear of a black invasion of the suburbs; fear that the water systems were going to be blown up or poisoned; fear of violence directed at a specific suburb such as Gross Pointe or Dearborn; fear that violence would begin on a specific date Blacks were going to kidnap and kill a young boy from every subdivision in the suburbs; school buses would be attacked; children would be shot on street corners ... By the time the rumors faded away, more than 10,000 calls had been recorded; the great majority of rumor callers were thought to be white. (Rossi, 1970, p. 212)

While many rumors collected may have been the venting of the fears of Whites about violence from Blacks, data from rumor control center archives indicates

that many calls, perhaps even the majority, were irrelevant to the stated mission of the RCCs. Indeed, available rumor report data calls into the question the efficacy and importance of the centers to any important objective at all. The Portland, Oregon, Rumor Center tallied its calls for a period of about two months during the summer of 1969, a period over which they had 1,929 calls. The highest incidence of calls is “Misc Information” (167), followed by “Local Information-Local Interests” (157), “Astronauts-Space” (140), “Disturbance” (134), and “Entertainment” (120). The only other category breaking 100 is “Phone calls taken by Rumor Center and refused because they would not leave Telephone Number for verification” (101). There were 79 “Prank Calls” (*Rumor control: Information material for the period June 20, 1969 to August 6, 1969* [handwritten on top is “Portland, Oregon”], c. 1969). The tally was a little more auspicious for Seattle. Out of 6,038 calls during one period, 1,403 were “Rumor calls” and 1,835 were “Incident calls” (people asking facts about something they heard happened). Others were “Calls on purpose of center” (208), “Research calls” (951), “Staff calls” (735)—supplemented with 111 crank calls, 251 hang ups, 162 wrong numbers, and 302 “other calls” ([*Document “Call Summary June 30 through October 3”*], c. 1969-70).

The period of riot-related rumor control centers lasted about 4 years, with their growth slowing as race riots became less frequent. After the riots following the King assassination in 1968, the number and seriousness of race riots fell sharply. Despite the fear that 1968 would be another “long, hot summer” of racial violence, there were no major race riots in American cities after March that year.

There were sharply fewer race riots in 1969 and 1970. A few rumor control centers lasted into the early 1970s, like the one in Seattle which diversified its services into rumor training and citizen information. A few were opened after 1970, but growth slowed considerably. Almost two thirds of the RCCs counted in Ponting's study in 1973 had been established before 1969—most of them in 1968. The same study found that seven were established in 1970 and only five in 1971-1972 (Ponting, 1973, p. 62).

The link between FBI activities and the rumor control centers (RCCs) that sprouted up across the country is suggested, but not proven, by the historical record. During the riots, local police departments, who were almost always in close communication with rumor control centers, often had, as in the case of the Chicago police department, "a close working relationship," with Army intelligence and the FBI ("Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders [aka The Kerner Report]," 1968). And, local police departments were encouraged by the Federal Government to establish intelligence units and funnel information to the Justice Department through the FBI (O'Reilly, 1991). An outstanding Freedom of Information Act request to the FBI may ultimately show direct ties between RCC's and the FBI.

Discussion

Understanding rumor control centers makes it necessary to consider the source

of race riots and the role that rumors played in the lives of Black citizens during this period.

The 1960s riots were borne out of conditions of poverty and extreme inequality. Black urban communities in the 1960s, widely referred to as “ghettos” at the time, were isolated, homogenous, and poor. Living conditions were substandard. The isolation and economic underdevelopment made residents easy prey for economic exploitation—so severe that it could be labeled “neocolonial” in nature (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 35). Black people were also subject to pervasive police harassment and violence: for example, fully one-quarter of black residents in South-Central Los Angeles reported personal harassment by the police in 1960 (Fogelson, 1971, p. 59). While civil rights victories may have appreciably changed the lives of Southern Blacks, they did not address the underlying issues in the urban Black communities—a more equitable distribution of resources, wealth and power (Feagin & Hahn, 1973).

Many urban Blacks saw little recourse in addressing the oppression they faced. This frustration led many to believe that their only recourse was violence. One sociologist notes that riots were:

a concerted attempt to achieve political objectives that had not been gained through other means.... If the urban violence of the 1960's fits any of the neat categorizations evolved in the historical analyses of collective violence, it might best be seen as an insurgency, or perhaps an insurrection against local political arrangements and authorities by those lacking the status of a formal belligerent. (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 43-5)

In this light, in the words of another sociologist, the riots were “articulate protests against genuine grievances in the black ghettos” (Fogelson, 1971, p. 22).

Indeed, the outcomes of the riots indicate their political nature. Booker T. Washington observed that after Atlanta’s race riots, a Black man was acquitted on a rape charge in that city for the first time (Mitchell, 1970). And 40 years later, a Black organizer in Newark would describe the political power that the riots gave to urban blacks:

“When we sat down at the bargaining table, an unnamed person sitting with a brick was with us,” he said. “The most important weapon was that there had been a riot and the powers that be were afraid of us. They would do anything to keep a lid on black anger.” (Fahim, 2007, July 8)

Despite this backdrop of oppression, riots did not emerge spontaneously—rather, they were usually triggered by a specific “inflammatory event” (Feagin & Hahn, 1973). This incident usually was a perceived insult to the community, mirroring past injustices. Abuse of power by the police, as in Watts, Newark (the arrest of a black cab driver) and Detroit (a raid of an after-hours club) (Feagin & Hahn, 1973), was often a factor. According to one research study, of 14 riot incidents analyzed between 1964 and 1967, 50% were triggered by interaction between police and Black citizens (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 144-6). This is corroborated by the Kerner report which also found 50% of all riots were precipitated by police actions, and 67% of major riots (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p.

146).

In this light, it is curious that riots were blamed on rumors. As the record indicates, rumor control centers functioned mainly as surveillance centers and as a tool for calming White citizens. Nonetheless, they were founded under the premise that riots were at least partly caused by rumor activity. This idea is a politically one-sided view of the interpersonal communication which misconstrues communication in the Black community at that time.

It is certainly likely that Black urban residents relied on interpersonal networks for riot-related information. Official media news channels were one-sided in their coverage of the riots, focusing on law enforcement issues and largely ignoring the underlying issues in Black communities. In some cases, the news media directly collaborated with law enforcement by agreeing to news blackouts or in broadcasting official information (including contact information for rumor control centers) (Feagin & Hahn, 1973). Even the Kerner Commission found “surprisingly heavy emphasis in the broadcasts on riot control activities, on law enforcement actions, and on the riot aftermath,” with little coverage of the disorders themselves (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 168). Because of this, among urban Blacks these official news channels, already distrusted, were replaced by informal ones, with word of mouth dissemination of information becoming dominant. One study of the major riot in Detroit found that most early riot participants “learned of the riot by means of interpersonal communication networks” (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 48). Interviews with riot participants who

had been arrested found that “the leading channel of information for those arrested was interpersonal communication, with 48 per cent finding out from another person” (Singer, 1970). This is unsurprising, given the social environment of Black communities. “Word of mouth exchanges between relatives and friends, on the streets and in store and bars, provided numerous important information and rumor linkages other than those provided by the white-dominated media such as television and newspapers,” argue Feagin and Hahn: “It would probably be difficult to overemphasize the importance of word-of-mouth communication networks in riot development”, they write (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 170-1).

Given their extreme distrust of White authorities, it is unsurprising that Black urban residents relied on one another for all types of information, particularly relating to such politically charged information as riots. In this context, the term “rumors” becomes a question of perspective. While unsubstantiated and differing from accounts sanctioned by authorities, some information about the riots and conditions leading to them circulated with a higher degree of validity than that of the news media. Their legitimacy, or external validity, came from its consistency with past experience. As Feagin and Hahn explain:

The failure of many Negroes to doubt the riot stories and sometimes exaggerated rumors that spread through a community in the early phases of a riot is perhaps related to the prior experience of ghetto residents. Since a sizable proportion of black residents take a negative view of police officers, they are unlikely to doubt, to take perhaps the most important example, accurate news and inaccurate rumors about police conduct that have circulated in

the wake of many a final precipitating incident. (Feagin & Hahn, 1973, p. 171-2)

This analysis makes it clear that, like the riots themselves, many rumors during this period were a consequence of social conditions. Many of the rumors may have been untrue, or exaggerated versions of events. But that was from the point of view of White authorities. A rumor can be defined as a message that is spread through un-official channels and that is not consistent with the interests of those in power. In this light, the term *rumor* became a labeling device to marginalize the points of view of an oppressed population. In the words of one analyst referring to the Detroit Mayor's speech about rumors:

The "rumor" label is hence a political term in the Mayor's lexicon; he is using it to discredit those extremists of whom he speaks, those he is trying so hard to disparage ... The RCC was an attempt to assert control in the name of a set of beliefs spelled out in the TV address. The Mayor was attempting to persuade the citizenry that his assessment of affairs was accurate and trustworthy. This is the meaning of the Rumor Control Center. (Rosenthal, 1979, p. 273)

In other words, by labeling the stories of Black residents "rumors," and taking official action to stem them, authorities could reinforce their authority to define the reality of the riots.

It also worth noting that the ascription of violence to rumors is not a politically neutral characterization. Because rumors are generally regarded as untrue, blaming violence on rumors suggests that somehow racial violence is based on a mistake, an unfortunate accident. Citing rumors as a cause or even a contributing

factor to racial violence mitigates the underlying racism, resentment, oppression, poverty, and other social factors that were at the heart of the riots. While all mass violence likely causes a breakdown in both the dissemination and trust of authoritative communication, blaming violence on the breakdown itself minimizes and obfuscates the underlying racism or grievances that were at the core.

Rumor control centers, particularly given the way they functioned primarily to assuage the fears of White residents, ultimately may have functioned mostly as good public relations. It sold the official view of riot situations to White constituents on the retail level, reassuring them that the government had the situation in hand (Rosenthal, 1979). Combined with its surveillance over Black communities, rumor control centers were a lever to reassert, and communicate, power over civil disorders and the citizens of Black communities.

Postscript: Rumor Control on Campus

“In September [1968] ... what students *might* do was front page news all over the Western world. Students began to compete with Negroes for the two-bit sociology features of national picture magazines.” (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1969, p. 18)

Between 1944 and 1970, the university population in the United States grew from 1.7 million to 7 million students, swelling college campuses. The political and social upheaval of the 1960s, unleashed by the dynamics of birth control, the

Vietnam War, Black Power, and recreational drugs, to name a few, led to an extraordinary period of student rebellion against social and political norms. As the authorities in major cities did a few years before, on some campuses university officials employed rumor control in an effort to control campus protest and disorder.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were an unprecedented (and unsurpassed) period of student activism in the United States and around the world. In the U.S., students made demands for more recognition of the rights and needs of Black students, for more power in the administration of campus affairs, for improved quality of life on campus, and for the end of the Vietnam War (Levine & Naisbitt, 1970). By mid-1970, nearly one-third of the country's 2,500 colleges and universities saw some kind of protest activity (*Campus unrest: The report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 1970, p. 18).

In some cases, these protests created violent clashes between students and law enforcement officials. On May 4, 1970, National Guardsmen shot and killed four students at Kent State University in Ohio during a student protest over the United States invasion of Cambodia. Nine students were wounded, including several who were not taking part in the protest ("Kent State shootings," 2007, September 13). Two weeks later, 2 students were killed and 12 injured by police at a student protest at Jackson State College in Mississippi.

Following these incidents, President Richard Nixon established the "President's

Commission on Campus Unrest.” Similar to the Kerner Commission, it was charged with exploring the causes of campus violence and proposing programs to avoid it in the future, and, also like its predecessor, the Campus Unrest commission issued a report with an ominous assessment of the problem. “The crisis on American campuses has no parallel in the history of the nation. This crisis has roots in divisions in society as deep as any since the Civil War,” it said (*Campus unrest: The report of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest*, 1970, p. 1). In addition to proposing solutions to change what the commission saw as underlying causes of campus unrest, like the Kerner Commission it provided recommendations on police surveillance to stem future trouble:

If the police are to do their job of law enforcement on the campus properly, they need accurate, up-to-date information, ... No clandestine intelligence work is necessary to discover what both university and law enforcement officials can easily discover in other ways—by sending policemen to attend open campus meetings, for example, or by making a daily harvest of the leaflets that are distributed on the campus ... But if most information gathering techniques do not threaten anyone’s privacy, some kinds, such as the use of police undercover agents posing as students, do create such dangers. They are sometimes required, but they should not be used unnecessarily. (*Campus unrest: The report of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest*, 1970, p. 171-2)

On several college campuses, this surveillance function, suggested by the Commission, was aided by rumor control centers.

Determining the number of campus RCCs in this period is difficult to establish, but evidence shows they existed at the University of Indiana (Bloomington) (*[File note]*, n.d.), the University of California (Riverside) (R. Brown, 1970, August 26),

the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), and the State University of New York (Buffalo). Extensive archival data is available only from the latter two, but tell a consistent story of a campus surveillance and propaganda organization working on behalf of campus administration. The data from these universities provide anecdotal evidence that campuses RCCs functioned much like RCCs in American cities.

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Like many universities across the country, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign experienced a wave of student protests during the late 1960s. In October 1967, approximately 150-200 students and faculty had a sit-in against Dow Chemical Company, protesting its involvement with the Vietnam War. Early in 1968, students protested for educational reform, calling for a radical change in the University curriculum. In September of that year, almost 250 newly-recruited Black students demanding better campus housing conditions were arrested for mob action in what was dubbed the University's first student "riot" (Williamson, 2003).

It was racial violence outside the University, however, which was used to justify the establishment of a rumor control center on the Urbana-Champaign campus. In 1969, a year after serious rioting in nearby Chicago, a University of Illinois Rumor Control Center, dubbed "Rumor Center," was established on campus by the cities of Urbana and Champaign during "racial disturbances" in the city of

Champaign. The cost of Rumor Center was shared by Urbana, Champaign, and the University (*Rumor Control Center at UI operates year-round [News Gazette, September 28, 1970], 1970*). Rumor Center was designed to provide a steady stream of information to the University leadership, municipal authorities, and the police (*Rumor center: Standard operating procedure of the center, 1970, November 18*). Its establishment was supported by the Chancellor of the University, who formally requested that University administrators cooperate with the RCC and provide it with information that the RCC could then “transmit to other parties” (Peltason, 1971, September 15).

By design, Rumor Center was an intelligence gathering service which could help the University and law enforcement anticipate and control student protest. It was established as a year-round (*Rumor Control Center at UI operates year-round [News Gazette, September 28, 1970], 1970*) and permanent (R. G. Brown, 1970, March 26) facility designed to operate “during times of either municipal or campus unrest to dispel rumors and dispense factual information concerning the situation” (Riley, n.d.). Inside the office on campus were telephones where student volunteers, overseen by a University administrator, fielded rumor calls. Rumor Center also used “crowd followers, reporting periodically on a crowd’s size, mood and movement” (*Rumor Control Center at UI operates year-round [News Gazette, September 28, 1970], 1970*). These “crowd followers” were organized into different zones which created a “permanent campus-wide schematic to provide continual reports of campus action” (B. Brown, n.d.). Each of nine campus areas had a “zone chairman,” two “assistant chairman,” and four

“reporters” who were trained on “where and when to report during a disturbance[,] How to estimate crowd size and mood effectively [and] Where to report information” (B. Brown, n.d.). Reporters carried a rumor center “official business” identification card, signed by the Chancellor (B. Brown, n.d.).

While Rumor Center may have been established because of concerns about violence in the surrounding community, it went into full swing as a result of the serious protest activity on campus. On May 7, 1970, following the deaths at Kent State and Jackson State, Illinois state police, in full riot dress, battled crowds of student protestors (*Sheet VII: University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970). The next day, as protests erupted across the state, the entire Illinois National Guard was called up for duty (*University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970). On May 10, state police and 750 National Guardsmen rounded up 102 University of Illinois students for arrest ([*“Daily Illini – Extra” newspaper dated Sunday, May 10*], c. 1970). Campus authorities found evidence of potentially worsening violence. One typewritten sheet, collected by Rumor Center during the week of these protests, gave directions to student protestors about how to make a Molotov cocktail. The document noted: “Don’t buy the gas; siphon it from your car (Pigs are watching those who buy gas in gallon cans)” (*University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970).

During this period, the Rumor Center operated from morning to night, collecting rumors and conducting surveillance on the student demonstrations. On one day,

May 9, the center fielded an estimated 1,000 calls (*University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970). The center also collected information from its “roving reporters,” comprised of student volunteers, who tracked the activities and movements of students on campus. Reports such as the one below were collected at Rumor Center:

9:00 100 Yippies took off in a closely packed squad went between altgeld and administration building yelling Bullshit, off the pigs. went east on green street on the sidewalk, up matthews. National guard turned in between chem annex and Noyes lab. The group then returned to the quad. Some 300 people scattered on the quad.... 9:10 Approx 800-1000 on quad listening to Nixon's speech. (Sheet X: dated May 8, 1970: *University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970)

The roving reporters provided qualitative assessments on crowd opinion and mood. “Mary Pollack reports that the flag that was burned was ignited against the vote of the majority of the crowd and that she believes that a good number were upset by that move,” says one rumor report sheet (*Sheet XV: dated May 7, 1970: University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records* 1970).

Rumor Center staff also monitored the goings-on of student protest planning meetings. One rumor sheet reported: “Meeting in Auditorium from 9:00pm until approx. 10:00PM. Approx 2500 students in attendance. Decision was almost unanimous to begin the strike on Wednesday” (*Sheet 1: dated May 10, 1970: University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970).

Some reports were highly detailed, noting activity in two to three minute intervals—a sort of running chronology of campus protest. The reporters also collected documents from the campus and included them in report files,

including a handwritten sign promoting a “Massive Flush-in” when students could “Shit for Liberation” (*[Handwritten sign, University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records]*, 1970).

Rumor Center was kept in close contact with the police. In fact, one organizer of the Center wrote to a colleague that “from past experience, the rumor center has gained all of its information through the police,” and wondered if there should be “any attempt to be in contact with those causing the disruption” (*[Document on official stationery of U. of Illinois “Office of Student Programs and Services” To Bob Brown from “Ken” dated February 25, 1970]*, 1970). The Associate Dean of Students told the Chancellor that Rumor Center enjoyed “excellent cooperation of the University police, Champaign and Urbana Police Departments” (S. Levy, 1969, May 28). Rumor Center staff also said that that cooperation with the National Guard was “very good,” and administrators met for lunch to discuss the Rumor Center over with the Brigadier General from the Illinois National Guard (Schilling, 1970a).

Information from Rumor Center, including unprocessed rumor logs, were forwarded directly to the University Chancellor (S. R. Levy, 1969, June 4), who also used the Center to disseminate his written statements—15,000 copies on one occasion (*Sheet 1: dated May 10, 1970: University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970). At least once the Rumor Center employed a sound truck which blasted the Chancellors message that any students participating in “a disruptive or coercive demonstration” would be suspended.

Besides using sound trucks to broadcast messages to students on campus, Rumor Center staff utilized advanced communication equipment for staff coordination. A radio network was used “for fixed position reporting during normal center operations” and as inputs “to the emergency paper distribution system when the Rumor Center phones are out of service” (Schilling, 1970b). The radio network was made up of a police scanner, an AM/FM radio and “7 AN/PRC 25 radios (USMCR)” —an abbreviation which suggests it was provided by the U.S. Marine Corp Reserve (*Annex # Rumor Center SOP*). Rumor Center staff also monitored student strikes across the country through “National Strike Radio” and Ham radio signals (*University of Illinois Archives Law Monitoring Committee Records*, 1970).

Protesters noted the administration’s communication advantage. One document labeled by the Rumor Center as “Distributed on the Quad” said:

Establishment has a weapon that is more effective than all the riot sticks, tear gas, etc. It is an advanced communication network. The Establishment can only be countered when his communications network is reduced to your level. This top priority is often missed by those trying to shut the Establishment down. (*[Document labeled “Distributed on the Quad” 9-11-12/70], c. 1970*)

The document urged overwhelming the administration with calls, cutting telephone handsets, and mutilating radio antennas. The document also urged filling balloons with ammonia and exploding them in campus offices (*[Document labeled “Distributed on the Quad” 9-11-12/70], c. 1970*). Rumor Center itself was accused by one student of “collecting information for the police

to help pin all the long-haired kids against the wall” (*Article from the Champaign-Urbana Courier dated 3/5/70*], 1970, March 3).

State University of New York, Buffalo

The State University of New York’s Buffalo campus, which like the University of Illinois experienced serious protest activity, also established a rumor control center. Students at SUNY Buffalo presented the administration with a variety of demands in early 1970, including radical changes in the school’s curriculum, an open admission policy, removal of police from campus, and the removal of SUNY Buffalo’s President, Peter Regan. All of these demands were refused (*Position statement of the Council of the State University of New York at Buffalo*, 1970, March 6). During the period of these demands, students on campus engaged in protests and committed vandalism, which included severe damage to the ROTC offices on campus (*Letter from Peter Regan (Acting President of SUNY Buffalo) to “Members of the University Community”*, 1969, November 10).

While there is less information about SUNY Buffalo’s Rumor Control Center than from the University of Illinois, information from its “Campus Unrest” archives indicate that they had many similarities. SUNY Buffalo’s RCC collected rumors from its telephone call center, and this information was augmented by other kinds of intelligence, including eavesdropping. One rumor sheet notes:

“Winton (Holland) called – when eating lunch in cafeteria last week heard a conversation—fellow had a gun and sold gun, was worried about people interfering with ROTC” (*Rumor [Handwritten sheet]*, n.d.). The center also collected documents such as organizing pamphlets from student protesters. RCC staffers on campus recorded student protest activity in fastidious detail, with some entries only minutes apart. They also attended meetings, such as a teach-in at the Economics department, and by phone reported back the group’s resolution to the RCC verbatim (*Document titled “Economics Department Teach-in (Phone from Dale, read back)*, n.d.). As at the University of Illinois, where protesters were labeled “Yippies” by Rumor Central volunteers, SUNY Buffalo volunteers provided some editorial slant to their reports: “Large aggressive group has left union to go to med school. 3-4 leaders. John is discouraged about prospects of a few cooler heads winning—the extremists seem to be in control” (*Handwritten document dated Nov 11. Labeled John Buark(?)*, 1:35, n.d.).

The RCC at SUNY Buffalo also served the purpose of calming panicked students. One rumor report recorded the following calls: “7:15 – “woman ‘who’s going to pay for all this g—d--- damage’: we signed off feeling much better.” 7:30 – “young girl=Heard a rumor that 100 local citizenry were coming to campus tonight—armed. Had we heard it? Answered no we had heard no such rumor.” (*[Handwritten, untitled document]*, n.d.). In this way, the rumor centers may have fulfilled the same function on campus as they did in U.S. cities—reassuring callers that authorities had the situation under control.

Chapter 4: Corporate Rumor Control

As we have seen, the Rumor Clinics organized by Gordon Allport and the anti-rumor campaign of the Office of War Information (OWI) were the basis for rumor research and rumor control in the postwar decades. But the military mobilization of people and capital during and after World War II had an even more fundamental impact on the management of public opinion. The U.S. Government's preoccupation with control and coercion, and its willingness to fund research to achieve these aims, worked synergistically with the desire of corporations to control the attitudes and behaviors of consumers. This led to research that was instrumental in creating a marketplace of media and marketing that monopolized mass communication during the last half of the 20th century.

The development of rumor control can be understood in the context of this dynamic. In the 20th century, corporations and the Government had a stranglehold on mass communication, and developed sophisticated techniques to shape public opinion. However, because rumors are a pervasive form of word of mouth communication that is inherently difficult to track and control, rumor cannot be monopolized simply with regulation or the expenditure of capital, particularly in a non-totalitarian society. Consequently, rumor control evolved as a process in which corporations and the Government has attempted to monitor, control and influence word of mouth communication in order to align word of mouth with their own interests. In this way, corporate efforts to study, track,

analyze and influence word of mouth in general, and rumors in particular, have exemplified a struggle to gain mastery over all channels of communication in order to control minds and actions.

Since the late 19th century, propaganda has been seen by elites as a way of imposing their will on the unruly masses, whose own communication was feared to be a dangerous source of instability. Intellectuals such as Gabriel Tarde and Walter Lippman analyzed the most effective way for the ruling class to understand and shape public opinion, and their writing influenced politicians and an emerging class of public relations, advertising, and marketing professionals (Ewen, 1996). These theorists recognized that word of mouth communication could mitigate the power of elites to shape public sentiment, because, as Tarde wrote in 1898, word of mouth was “the strongest agent of imitation, of the propagation of sentiments, ideas, and modes of action” (Tarde, 1898, quoted in Graham & Havlena, 2007). Consequently, when public opinion management was made into an applied art and science for corporate marketers by practitioners such as Edward Bernays in the first decades of the 20th century, the power of word of mouth was taken into account. Bernays in particular recognized that the direct dissemination of propaganda was insufficient; elites needed to create a “two-way street” of communication between propagandist and the public in order to be truly effective. Related propaganda techniques were refined during a watershed phase during World War I under the auspices of Woodrow Wilson’s propaganda agency, the Committee for Public Information, which augmented its pro-war posters and films by enlisting hundreds of

thousands of citizens to spread Government talking points in their communities (Ewen, 1996).

The U.S. Government mobilized an extensive propaganda operation leading up to and throughout World War II, a time when the first Government-sponsored rumor control efforts were implemented. A whole generation of communication theorists, researchers, and practitioners spent that war developing domestic and foreign propaganda for the Government and its military. According to Christopher Simpson, “Virtually all of the scientific community that was to emerge during the 1950’s as leaders in the field of mass communication research spent war years performing applied studies on U.S. and foreign propaganda” (Simpson, 1996, p. 25). Leaders in the related fields of advertising and media also spent the war developing U.S. propaganda. For example, William S. Paley, the founder of CBS, was a colonel in the Army’s Psychological Warfare Division. The alumni of the OWI included the publishers of Time, Look and Fortune and at least six partners of large advertising agencies. The OWI also employed pioneers in marketing research such as George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Rensis Likert, who developed sophisticated techniques for gauging public opinion and mood (ibid.).

After World War II, the U.S Government continued to invest enormous amounts of funding into propaganda research, setting the agenda for the burgeoning field of mass communication. Almost all of the significant communication research immediately after the war was government-funded. Much of this funding was through military agencies to study psychological warfare (PSYOP) techniques.

Psychological warfare consists of “planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of organizations, groups, and individuals” (Rouse). PSYOP includes propaganda warfare, whose techniques of leaflet dropping, radio broadcasts and disinformation are designed to help win wars by pacifying populations or destroying enemy morale. PSYOP funding by the U.S. military was hugely influential in the development of communication research by universities and communication research centers. According to Simpson (1996), “their reliance on psychological warfare money was so extensive as to suggest that the crystallization of mass communications studies into a distinct scholarly field might not have come about during the 1950’s without substantial military, CIA and USIA intervention” (p. 53).

The other major influence on communication research was corporations, who were developing tools to create, sell, and advertise to mass audiences. The growth of a consumer society based on mass production, constantly growing product consumption, and waste, relied on the development and exploitation of mass advertising channels (Ewen, 2001). This process began in the early 1920s, but was in full swing after World War II, due to the mass adoption of radio and television. Consequently, a burgeoning media industry needed social science to create audience research that would allow it to grow and sell audiences (Gitlin, 1978). Social science was employed (literally and figuratively) to help advance the progress in mass marketing and mass broadcasting.

These twin influences, the military and major corporations, came together to shape mass communication after World War II. As Robert Merton wrote, “Under direct market pressure and military needs, definite research techniques [were] developed and these techniques initially bear the marks of their origin; they are strongly conditioned by the practical uses to which they are first to be put” (quoted in Gitlin, 1978). Another sociologist who was directly involved with government-funded propaganda research concurs:

Perhaps no group of investigators in the social sciences is more acutely aware of the implications of client-supported research than students of mass communication ... Under such circumstances it is to be expected that the gentleman paying the piper will insist on calling the tune. In large part, the resulting music has been composed of short term studies of the effects of mass media propaganda, information, or advertising campaigns. (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958, p. 1)

Paul Lazarsfeld and “Two-Step” communication

Both the military and corporations wanted to improve techniques for shaping public opinion. This goal shaped what became the “dominant paradigm” of mass communications research for the rest of the century: one that “poses questions from the vantage of the command-posts of institutions that seek to improve or rationalize their control over social sectors in social functions” (Gitlin, 1978). Put simply, most communication research focused on a top-down model of mass communication as social control. The person most associated with this

“dominant paradigm” was Paul Lazarsfeld, founder of the “Bureau of Applied Science” at Columbia University, and one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century. Lazarsfeld’s approach, according to Todd Gitlin, was custom-fit for mass advertisers:

Only with a search for the relevant history—in particular, the history of mass media in the United States—can we begin to grasp the significance of Lazarsfeld’s work. For it is an oeuvre that is unimaginable apart from the emergence of the practice and theory of mass-consuming society in the twentieth century.... The theory of “effects” was first developed for the direct, explicit use of broadcasters and advertisers, and continues to be used mostly in those circles, to grow more sophisticated there. (Gitlin, 1978, p. 233-3)

None of Lazarsfeld’s work is more famous, and exemplary of this “dominant paradigm,” than his concept of the “two-step flow of communications” which was made popular by his book *Personal Influence*, written with Elihu Katz. The book is summarized by its subtitle: “the part played by people in the flow of mass communications.” This book, and Lazarsfeld’s book that preceded it, *Voting*, postulated that mass media’s influence on product and political decision-making was not direct; rather, influence “flowed” through certain “opinion leaders” within a population who influenced their acquaintances. The work was a direct, empirical descendent of Tarde’s idea that conversation was the linchpin in public persuasion. Gitlin writes:

[within the] the search for specific, measurable, short-term, individual, attitudinal and behavioral “effects” of media content ... the most influential single theory has been, most likely, “the two-step flow of communications”: the idea that media messages reach

people not so much directly as through the selective, partisan, complicating interpolation of “opinion leaders.” (Gitlin, 1978, p. 207)

“It may be that few formulations in the behavioral sciences have had more impact than the two-step flow model,” an advertising researcher would claim in 1968 (Arndt, 1968, quoted in Gitlin, 1978). It was so influential that Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell calls *Personal Influence* “the standard work” (Bell, 1975, quoted in Gitlin, 1978).

The “two-step flow” model was the direct result of a marketing/military complex that developed and supported communication research. The research behind the two-step flow model originated six years before Lazarsfeld’s first book on the subject appeared, and was developed from U.S.-sponsored propaganda and covert warfare work in the Philippines and the Middle East (Simpson, 1996, p. 74). Lazarsfeld’s research for *Personal Influence*, which popularized the concept, was funded by the McFadden company, a major commercial media company which published the popular *True Story* magazine. McFadden was interested in understanding if its readership grew “horizontally” through word of mouth among its working-class readers, as opposed to “vertically,” from higher-class readers (Gitlin, 1978, p. 236). In this way, the twin forces of the military and corporations underwrote a crucial and influential plank in the development of mass media research, and consequently the marketing and media industries---as well as an underlying principle in understanding how rumors relate to mass persuasion.

Empirical Applications: Project Revere

It is understandable that the U.S. military's PSYOP branches, which sought to coerce and control people through propaganda, would be concerned with a two-step process of communication. Once disseminated, the propagandist lost control over the message, and social networks could distort messages and blunt their intended impact. On the other hand, the secondary spread of messaging could be a boon to military efforts to spread messages efficiently because messages passed from person to person increased the dispersion of the message. Consequently, Government military agencies invested in research designed to understand the process of the social spread, or "message diffusion" of propaganda. While not a direct descendant of Lazarsfeld's work, this research became both an empirical test of the two-step communication model and a milestone in research about the spread and effects of rumors.

One of the ways the military worked to influence the attitudes of enemy populations was to drop leaflets on them from airplanes. During World War II, the United States and Britain dropped millions of leaflets on Japanese and German soldiers with messages such as "Think of the destruction, every time we four-engined bombers come over. And we will be back soon. You'll be hearing from us" (Connolly, 1957, March). These efforts were seen as a success in both demoralizing enemy soldiers and pacifying civilians. During the U.S.'s next

foreign conflict, the Korean War, the U.S. dropped more than 2 billion leaflets on North Korea in a 3-year period (Connolly, 1957, March).

The military wanted to improve these massive propaganda efforts and to develop models about the way word of mouth and rumors affected the transmission of messages within a population. In the early 1950s, the United States Air Force (USAF) and the CIA's MKULTRA Mind Control Project, whose mission perfectly reflected its name, funded "Project Revere," a series of experiments to understand how to improve airborne propaganda (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958). Project Revere was conducted by the USAF in partnership with academics from the University of Washington, who were given "almost unlimited funds" to conduct the research (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958, p. lii). The CIA's MKULTRA Mind Control group, who later conducted experiments with LSD and electroshock treatments for improved interrogation ("Project MKULTRA," 2007, December 25), hid its sponsorship of Project Revere behind a front group (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958).

The driving concern behind Project Revere was in increasing the degree to which leaflets could influence behavior. Changing behavior was the dependent variable, or end goal, of the researcher's models. As one researcher explained:

How effectively communication has been achieved will be designated by the degree to which the knowers *comply* with the intent of the communicator, as stated in the information transmitted. Compliance is overt behavior requested in and stimulated by the message. (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958, p. 5)

Researchers sought to improve the persuasiveness of mass communication by understanding what happened to messages when they were passed by word of mouth. This was of particular concern because, while mass media could be controlled, regulating person-to-person communication was more difficult. This was acknowledged matter-of-factly in a book-length summary of Project Revere.

The flow of information may be restricted through the rigid control of publication facilities, the jamming of radio broadcasts, the use of “closed-circuit” signal systems, illiteracy, and the underdevelopment of media facilities in some parts of the world. However, these restrictions are perhaps secondary to the restrictive functioning of a host of social and psychological mechanisms which may prevent the completion of a particular communicative act. Such a possibility increasingly haunts the users of the media of mass communication, whether they be propagandists working in the cold war, advertisers looking for a hot sale, or educators trying to substitute reason for passion and somehow keep the public temperature near normal. (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958, p. 6)

During 44 Project Revere “missions,” the USAF dropped a total of three-quarters of a million leaflets on 35 different communities (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958).

Leaflets directed people to take certain actions, such as take a questionnaire, mail in the leaflet, or pass the leaflet along to another person. University of Washington researchers followed up on the leaflet drop with in-person and phone interviews to determine how messages the leaflets contained spread in the targeted community. Prior to each test, local police and civil authorities, and the local media, were contacted and requested to keep the test secret and reply to any queries with a statement prepared by the researchers. In every test, the authorities and media fully complied.

One Project Revere test, in which researchers used a coffee slogan as a stimulus, serves as a good example of the project. On July 17, 1951, an airplane dropped leaflets reaching about 17% of residents in Issaquah, Washington with an advertising slogan—“Gold Shield Coffee—Good as Gold.” The next day, another 30,000 leaflets were dropped with the name of the brand, and told that some people in town knew the advertising slogan. They were told that if they learned the slogan they would receive a free pound of coffee. On the third day, interviewers (carrying bags of coffee) visited almost every home in Issaquah and asked if they knew the slogan, and if so, how they heard about it. An Army Psychological Operations officer explained the results of the study:

Contrary to expectation, learning about the message through conversation produced better recall than actually seeing the leaflet alone. The greater interest of two people speaking about the leaflet was more important than one person just reading a leaflet. More people will hear about the leaflet through conversation than will actually see the leaflet. (Buckner, 1965, quoted in Friedman, c. 2004)

In other words, the U.S. military’s first experiments with what later would be called “viral marketing” proved that word of mouth communication was more influential than direct propaganda.

Project Revere researchers devoted much effort to rumors, conducting tests in which they planted fake rumors and tracked how they spread. Over the course of the studies, researchers attempted “a wide range of schemes to find how a rumor can be started-to-order under normal peacetime conditions and used a vehicle for

experimentation.” One researcher wrote in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* that “We learned how to start rumors only after many disappointing failures,” including paying people if they found someone who heard the rumor, and planting a “juicy rumor” with a known gossip in a housing project (Dodd, 1958, p. 545). But the work paid off. “We can now set up a perfectly controlled experiment in a classroom, plot an exact logistic growth curve on the blackboard in advance as a prediction, start the rumor circulating, and watch it follow closely (within sampling limits) that forecast” (Dodd, 1958, p. 547). Researchers felt that the rumor research was the most important part of Project Revere. “Perhaps the largest carry-over from our peacetime experiments to possible war situations will be the development of techniques for measuring and controlling rumors,” a Revere researcher wrote (Dodd, 1958, p. 258). The rumor research could also be generalized to the dynamics of all word of mouth; one of the main findings from Project Revere was that “oral activity resulting from the leaflet operation had many of the characteristics and functions commonly attributed to ‘rumoring’” (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958).

Project Revere spawned more than 50 academic articles, theses and dissertations with titles such as “Interpersonal Relations in the Social Diffusion Process” (1955) and “The Relationship between Distances and Social Interaction---the Case of Message Diffusion” (1953) (Simpson, 1996). Five decades later, Project Revere was largely forgotten in the marketing industry, even among professionals who specialized in “word of mouth marketing” and rumor control. Nonetheless, at the end of the 20th century, the concerns and interests of the

military/marketing complex would come together in similar ways to answer the same kinds of questions.

“Word of Mouth Advertising” in the Golden Years of Advertising

As the Air Force and CIA were experimenting with dropping leaflets on unsuspecting communities in the postwar years, American marketers were refining mass marketing techniques that bombarded television viewers with millions of advertising messages. With the American public shaped into an audience of three dominant television networks, corporations blanketed the public with advertisements—just like the Air Force had done with leaflets over U.S. occupied territories after World War II.

Given that communication research was in large part funded by the military, and this research (and the graduates of newly minted university communication departments) were supplying advertising with its ideas, it is no surprise that the marketing industry began to think of itself in terms shared with the military. As a 1958 article in the *Journal of Marketing* explained matter-of-factly:

Advertising as used today is primarily a type of propaganda. The essence of propaganda is that it conditions people to act in a way favorable to or desired by the propagandist. It deliberately attempts to influence, persuade, and convince people to act in a way that they would not otherwise act ... In American business, commercial propaganda is part and parcel of the mass-production process. (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958, p. 131, 139.)

With most major media commercialized and structured as a venue for advertising, the marketing and media industry was organized according a one-way propaganda model. Though the Lazarsfeld research was influential and continually cited in marketing research literature, message diffusion was not a primary point of control, and thus focus, for American advertisers, apart from certain creative tactics which simulated product endorsements from everyday people. On the whole, marketing theory envisaged advertising working on the individual level, directly persuading one person at a time. Audiences were sold by ratings which added up the number of people who would see an ad, not spread a message.

During the heyday of television advertising, which roughly stretched over the last half of the 20th century, word of mouth remained a tangential issue for marketers. The power and simplicity of television advertising, with which corporations could achieve mass reach to their intricately-crafted advertising messages, set the agenda for much of the research during this time. The focus of marketing research was in creating better advertising and making sure it reached audiences with maximum efficiency.

In 1960s, however, there were some efforts to address the issue of social message diffusion, or, put into marketing terms, word of mouth. In social science, new research that followed up on the experiments of Lazarsfeld and of the Revere Project was still being published. According to DeFleur, “By the middle of the

1960's, the debate over whether word-of-mouth was an important or only a minor channel for the diffusion of the news was in full force" (De Fleur & Larsen, 1958, p. xxvii). Within marketing, however, apart from a few scattered articles, the debate was subdued. But the social turmoil of the 1960s, along with the maturation of a generation raised watching television, suggested to some observers that consumers were becoming savvier and that mass marketing was losing its edge.

Ernest Dichter, known as "the founder of motivational psychology," and a consultant to companies such as DuPont, Exxon, and Colgate/Palmolive (Ames, 1998, August 8), raised the specter of an informed and ad-resistant consumer in a 1967 article in the Harvard Business Review. In the article, Dichter argued that the "current 'age of advertising consciousness'" was rendering traditional advertising approaches ineffective, due to "this strong orientation of sophisticated skepticism toward modern sales messages." As the power of advertising waned, Dichter reasoned, the power of word of mouth had increased. He wrote:

When the consumer believes that an advertisement is more of a sales tool than information and guidance, he feels threatened. He rejects the advertising claim. He turns for a solution of his buying problem to Word-of-Mouth. When the consumer feels that the advertiser speaks to him as a friend or as an unbiased authority, creating the atmosphere of Word-of-Mouth, the consumer will relax and tend to accept the recommendation. (Dichter, 1966, p. 147).

Consequently, Dichter explained that advertisers had two options: *stimulating* word of mouth, and *simulating* word of mouth. In the first case, stimulating word of mouth, Dichter argued that advertisers should target advocates who had already purchased a product, getting them to advocate on the product's behalf. "He is the man to sell because he will be an active propagandist," Dichter explained (Dichter, 1966, p. 148). To simulate word of mouth, Dichter wrote, advertisers had to demonstrate in their advertising that ordinary people liked and recommended their products. He wrote that successful advertising followed the "*same psychological channels of communication and satisfies the same motivations on which the whole importance and success of Word-of-Mouth rest*" (Dichter, 1966, p. 148). This idea, that the purpose of advertising is to create, stimulate and amplify word of mouth, would gain widespread belief in the marketing industry almost four decades later, but had little immediate impact on marketing behavior at the time.

Word of mouth did however become an important enough issue that the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), a non-profit trade group formed by the Association of National Advertisers and the American Association of Advertising Agencies in 1936, published a paper on the subject in 1966. The monograph was titled "Word of Mouth Advertising: A Review of the Literature," and was written by Johan Arndt, who had, in a second article published in 1966, called word of mouth "almost a mysterious force" (Arndt, 1967a).

Arndt lamented that whereas social science “had developed a substantial body of data on the role of word of mouth in interpersonal (group) relations, and on part played by word of mouth in the process of new product diffusion,” marketing itself had not done much to advance knowledge in this area. Mainly, this was because of word of mouth’s elusiveness to marketing research.

[The] marketing literature offers little help to the marketer eager to tap the word of mouth resources ... It appears that the state of the art in marketing has not progressed much from where it stood 20 years ago when ... [a] popular textbook concluded pessimistically that there was no way of measuring accurately the forcefulness of word of mouth. (Arndt, 1967b, p. 1-2).

Because of the paucity of marketing papers, Arndt focused on what was available in social science, recapping much of the war-related research of Allport, Knapp, and the work of Lazarsfeld. Arndt could find only a few concrete examples of word of mouth advertising, including some of the earliest:

In the 1930’s there was considerable editorial concern with the use of deliberate, planted rumors.... The most sophisticated [rumor mongering] service was said to have been the firm of W. Howard Downey and Associates, with offices in New York, Chicago, Atlanta and Toronto. This company was ... prepared on a few hours’ notice to “supply operatives for spreading rumors anywhere in the country.” The services offered included loud “spontaneous” conversations among two stooges in subways, railroad trains, in elevators or at football games. The impact of this service was supposedly tremendous. (Arndt, 1967b, p. 4).

Arndt also cited Chrysler’s efforts in 1962 to “generate conversations” about a new car model by paying 5,000 cab drivers in 67 cities to ask passengers if they had seen the 1963 Plymouth.

But apart from these isolated cases of rumor planting and staged conversations, Arndt found that “it would be an exaggeration to claim that marketers have enthusiastically attempted to utilize word of mouth.” The reason was, Arndt explained, because:

word of mouth advertising, by definition, is uncontrollable by the manufacturer. Marketers may feel that messages, once planted, will undergo serious distortions as they pass from mouth to mouth. Probably more important is that so far too little is known about the process of word of mouth. (Arndt, 1967b, p. 6)

Nonetheless, despite a lack of hard data on the effects of word of mouth, Arndt concluded that “word of mouth emerges as one of the most important, if not *the* most important source of information for the consumer” (Arndt, 1967b, p. 70).

Marketers had sporadically used techniques to get people talking about their products, but the lack of control, knowledge and measurement sharply limited their efforts. Thirty years would pass before major changes in communication technology would lead marketers to believe that word of mouth, and rumors, were phenomena that were not only impossible to ignore, but were the best opportunity to maintain their influence over consumer attitudes and behavior.

Word of Mouth: A Threat to Mass Marketing

In 2006, McKinsey, the blue-chip management consulting firm, offered a portentous, but unoriginal, prognosis for mass marketing:

Today's chief marketing officers (CMOs) confront a painful reality: their traditional marketing model is being challenged, and they can foresee a day when it will no longer work.... The declining effectiveness of mass advertising is only the most visible sign of distress. Marketers also face a general proliferation of media and distribution channels, declining trust in advertising, multitasking by consumers, and digital technologies that give users more control over their media time. ("Boosting returns on marketing investment," 2006)

This was not news to McKinsey's Fortune 100 clients. For at least a decade, since the beginning of mass adoption of the Internet, marketers had been wringing their hands about the decline of the "traditional marketing model," shorthand for one-way, mass advertising. The Internet disrupted the major media's monopoly of message distribution, and along with it, the monopoly of advertisers to capture consumer attention. This realization led to the Global Marketing Officer of Procter & Gamble to assert that "the traditional marketing model we all grew up with is obsolete"; the CMO of McDonalds to say that "mass marketing today is mass mistake"; and the CEO of one of the world's largest advertising agencies to say that "for the first time the consumer is boss, which is fascinatingly frightening, scary and terrifying, because everything we used to do, everything we used to know, will never work" (quoted in Kirby & Marsden, 2006).

This perception was directly related to the idea that the Internet increased the power of word of mouth. Part of this dynamic was that rumors, now unleashed by

the Internet, began to be seen as serious threats to brands, profits and company share prices. By the time McKinsey wrote about consumers' increasing control over their media time, many large companies had adopted technologies to track what people were saying about their companies and brands over the Internet. Unsurprisingly, these new technologies and tools were developed for both corporations and the government, with funding by military agencies and the CIA.

Rumors: The Emerging Threat

While the Internet upended assumptions about traditional marketing, it also changed perceptions, among marketers and PR professionals, about the power, scale and danger of rumors. Beginning in the 1990s, rumors were seen as a serious threat to corporate images, share prices, sales and profits. Interviews with ten senior-level public relations professionals², along with a review of the academic and trade literature, provide a broad and consistent perspective on current approaches to word of mouth and rumor control—and ways that rumors relate to the process of marketing itself.

I conducted ten interviews ranging from 30 to 90 minutes each, data from which are presented in this chapter. Each respondent gave me permission to record and transcribe the interview. Respondents included: Interviewee 1, External Relations Manager at Procter & Gamble; Interviewee 2, SVP Communication at Manning, Salvage & Lee; Interviewee 3, External Relations Director at Procter & Gamble; Interviewee 4, VP of Research at StrategyOne, a division of Edelman; Interviewee 5, Communication Supervisor at Manning Salvage & Lee; Interviewee 6, VP, Interactive Media at GolinHarris; Interviewee 7, SVP Communications at Manning, Salvage and Lee; Interviewee 8, President of Bernstein Crisis Management Inc; Interviewee 9, former Associate Commissioner at the Food & Drug Association and SVP at Manning, Salvage and Lee; and Interviewee 10, Owner of Interference Incorporated.

Rumors are considered a serious problem for companies, particularly among public relations professionals. A survey of 74 PR professionals published in 2000 found that respondents reported hearing a rumor they were concerned about on average about once a week (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2000). Rumors are feared because, according to a contemporary rumor control manual, “They can severely damage company and brand images, undermine corporate credibility, stimulate consumer boycotts, adversely affect employee job performance and satisfaction, and have far-reaching effects on financial markets” (Kimmel, 2004, p. 4). Several well-known rumors have been known to hurt the reputations of major companies: a rumor that McDonald’s used worm meat in its burgers led to a 30% sales drop in certain areas, and the rumor that Procter & Gamble was associated with Satanism brought Procter & Gamble into a high-profile court battle with competitors accused of spreading the rumor (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Because of this, the problem of rumors is treated by high levels of hyperbole. One expert on corporate rumors writes:

Although the stakes clearly are on a smaller scale, the fight against commercial rumors shares much in common with the ongoing international war against terrorism. In both cases, the specific enemy and timing of the strike are not known until it is too late to avoid potentially dire consequences. Even the strongest prevention efforts cannot successfully ward off every single blow. (Kimmel, 2004)

While a decline of trust in corporations is sometimes blamed for an increase in the incidence and virulence of rumors, above all, marketers believe that it is the Internet that is the main culprit. “With a plethora of places where consumers can express their opinions or vent their rage, the Internet also functions as a

worldwide electronic grapevine that fosters rumors, innuendos, gossip, hoaxes, intentional misinformation, and stock manipulation” one consulting firm claims (Kassel), p. 6). The executives I spoke to believe that the fundamental nature of the Internet—which connects people across time and space, and allows ordinary people to distribute messages and ideas—has increased the power, reach and virulence of rumors. As one executive told me:

I think it's easier to spread rumors now.... [I]n the past it used to just be – you know, we say like it used to be a monologue where brands would just push out their messages with advertising.... Now it's a multi-logue.... The Internet has totally revolutionized rumor mongering now because, you know, you can spread things so much more quickly. (Interviewee 2, personal communication, September 20, 2007)

Besides making rumors easier to spread (or at least more visible to PR professionals), the executives think that the “multi-logue” aspect of the Internet has made rumors harder to track, pin down, and rebut. Said one executive:

Well it used to be that rumors were just word of mouth kind of things that you had to deal with on a community basis, and that was bad enough, but at least they could often be backtracked and contained pretty easily. The Internet has turned rumors into an entirely different creature that spreads virally and gets – there's no such thing as keeping things local anymore. They're instantly international. (Interviewee 8, personal communication, November 5, 2007)

This concept of rumors spreading “virally” is consistent with a common perception of rumors—that they spread fast through the process of social contagion. “I think rumors are like a really strong virus, like a SARS virus that is

resilient because of the Internet,” (Mandy O'Donnell, personal communication, September 25, 2007) one executive told me. Another told me: “I think it’s like a Herpes virus, right? So there’ve been dormant for a while and then damn it you got a cold sore on your lip again ... It just goes and hides somewhere for a little while. It’s just dormant. It’s waiting for the next opportunity and, and it comes around again” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, September 15, 2007).

PR professionals use a variety of monitoring and tracking techniques to look out for the rumor ‘virus’. They employ media monitoring services and use their relationships with reporters to keep on top of what may be percolating about their client or client’s product. Media services scan and report any mention of their brand in most media, one executive told me (Interviewee 1, personal communication, September 23, 2007). Another said that “our teams, because of the nature of PR, have to have good relationships with reporters. If reporters start to call and ask about something or somebody calls, you know, in a very fishy way, starts digging around for something. So you’re like what’s going on?” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, September 20, 2007).

Companies also use their call centers, which function much like the Rumor Control Centers during the 1960s riots (described in Chapter 3). Procter & Gamble uses its call center as a way of gathering intelligence about what people may be saying about their products, as well as a channel for disseminating carefully-honed responses to rumors.

One very important way is in contacts through our consumer relations group, the 800 number. They handle thousands of calls a month depending on the size of the brand and literally keep track in a database the subjects they're handling.... from time to time you'll suddenly hear 10 or 15 people in a geographically dispersed region talking about something they have heard and want to know if it's true or not, and that then comes up to my attention.... So we will prepare statements for use by our consumer relations people so when they get a call at the 800 number, they can assure the consumer what the truth is.... If the phone is gonna ring, we can speak with the same consistent message that everybody else is hearing. (Interviewee 1, personal communication, September 23, 2007)

In addition to their call centers, companies use their employees to monitor rumors in the marketplace. Just as the U.S. Government used the employees of its numerous agencies to monitor rumors for the OWI, modern corporations use their human resources to keep on top of what is being said about their companies. As one respondent told me:

You're seeing a lot more sort of activating of employees around a lot of these issues. So you're seeing people sort of taking an inventory of their assets when it comes to communications and corporate communications and saying, "You know, we've got this huge employee base that we've been sitting here with and we're not doing anything with them" ... so, you know, the regional marketing managers, you know, increasingly becoming responsible in some of these companies for knowing what's taking place in a certain region. What are people saying? ... What are you hearing? How does it affect us? (Interviewee 4, personal communication, December 13, 2007)

Another executive acknowledged this source for rumor tracking.

I've gotten things from the field.... Somehow or another somebody on a customer team – let's say it's a sales rep for... Wal-Mart, Target whatever. They've somehow intercepted an email. It didn't come to us directly, but it – they were on one of the chains – and it's their P&G sales person who sends it, you know, in to us. "Do we know anything about this?" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, September 15, 2007)

Many of these techniques, such as monitoring rumors through the press, call centers, and employees, reflect similar rumor control efforts from World War II and the 1960s riots. But just as the Internet increased perception of the danger of rumors to corporations, and brought the issue of word of mouth to the fore, it brought new techniques for tracking rumors, developed for and by corporations but funded by the military and CIA.

Rumor monitoring: CIA/military redux

Those with an interest in monitoring, analyzing and ultimately controlling rumors have struggled with ways to gather them. The OWI, during World War II, and the Rumor Control Centers in the 1960s, struggled to gather good quality rumors. A sampling of the submissions they received indicates that their techniques turned up a lot of junk and miscellany. Short of the profligate efforts of the USAF and CIA during the Project Revere experiments, a census-type measurement of rumors was all but impossible until the development of new technology in the late 1990s.

As people began to communicate more and more on Internet message boards, discussion lists, and later web logs (blogs), researchers and entrepreneurs recognized that this prodigious and public conversational data offered an unprecedented source of information about what people were saying. This new data promised a revolutionary new method for tracking and analyzing rumors. As one academic researcher who specializes in rumor study concluded in 1998:

For years, the central study on how rumors start and spread was a World War II work by Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman (1947).... [But t]he problem faced by investigators is how to capture and analyze the interactive processing of rumor in a way that is both methodologically sound and generalizable beyond the particular observational context. To be fair, the study of rumor is not easy.... However, the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (e.g. electronic mail, bulletin board systems, and chat groups) has provided a unique opportunity to study the interactive processing of rumor in an unobtrusive way.... CMC offers a fresh opportunity for unobtrusive observation of social interaction and provides researchers with a chance to study the intricacies of the social phenomenon we call *rumor*. (Bordia & Rosnow, 1998, p. 163-5, 177)

In the 1990s, several companies began to develop technology to track and mine what people were saying on the Internet. One of the first companies offering technology and services to track conversations on the Internet was Intelliseek, founded by a former Procter & Gamble brand manager. Intelliseek's technology was developed to search, aggregate and organize Internet conversational data for companies that were interested in tracking what people were saying. The company's service is "used by brand managers, public relations professionals and product researchers at Fortune 1000 enterprises to derive timely, actionable consumer and competitive intelligence by analyzing consumer word-of-mouth

and other related information sources,” according to its web site (“In-Q-Tel Funds Intelliseek”, 2007).

Even though it publicly positioned itself for serving corporate marketers, Intelliseek received funding from the CIA in 2001 through the In-Q-Tel, a CIA organization. In 1999, the CIA formed In-Q-Tel, which was designed to function like a venture capital firm, with a budget of \$28 million. In-Q-Tel drew upon corporate and academic expertise, with a Board of Trustees that include representatives from Telecredit, Xerox, Lockheed Martin and Columbia University (Yannuzzi, 2000). The organization was founded on the premise that the CIA and major corporations shared the same interests in the information age. As In-Q-Tel’s web site puts it:

One could compare the CIA with any Fortune 500 company, and there would be a 70 to 90% overlap in information technology needs. The CIA and the Intelligence Community are super information enterprises that collect knowledge, sort knowledge, analyze it and distribute it. Comparing these core business activities with those of major U.S. companies ... provides a picture of much of the technology that the Intelligence Community needs to do its job today. (“In-Q-Tel website”)

Upon receiving CIA investment, Intelliseek’s CEO nicely illustrated this confluence of government and corporate investment with the statement: “We are very excited to have In-Q-Tel as our partner along with Ford Motor Company and Nokia Venture Partners” (“In-Q-Tel Funds Intelliseek”, 2007).

Intelliseek (which was later merged with another company and purchased by Nielsen Media Research to become Nielsen BuzzMetrics) was not the only company created in the late 1990s to monitor and mine consumer conversation on the Internet. Several other companies provide similar services, and most have received government funding or government contracts. Boston-based Cymfony, for example, is a company whose technology:

dissects article, paragraphs and sentences to determine who and what is being talked about, whether something or someone is a key focus or a passing reference, and how the various entities mentioned (companies, people, locations and events) relate to one another. ("Cymfony website ")

Along with ConocoPhillips, Hasbro and Verisign ("Cymfony website clients,"), Cymfony's first clients included the Air Force Intelligence Agency and the Joint Warfare Analysis Center (Personal communication with Cymfony principals, February 22, 2007). According to its web site, Cymfony received its initial funding through "U.S. Government research contracts and intelligence agencies. The Department of Defense has sponsored continued advancements in this technology over the last eight years" ("Cymfony website "). After Taylor/Nelson Sofres, one of the world's largest market research companies, bought Cymfony in 2005, TNS MI/Cymfony spun off its Government Systems business to focus on "government sponsored enhancements, particularly for DoD, intelligence and law enforcement communities" ("Cymfony website ").

Another company, Umbria, “a marketing intelligence company that mines social media—including blogs, message boards, Usenet, and product review sites ... deliver[ing] insights into companies, products, people, and issues,” claims to do work for the Department of Homeland Security (Personal communication with Umbria principal, February, 22, 2006).

The U.S. military’s investment in these technologies likely reflects its domestic and international surveillance efforts. The U.S. Government invests enormous amounts of resources in gathering and mining cell phone, email, and Internet communication. One of the largest known programs is called “Echelon,” the National Security Agency “computer system that monitors millions of e-mail, fax, telex and phone messages sent over satellite-based communications systems as well as terrestrial-based data communications.” Echelon monitors phone calls and emails traveling through the air and undersea telephone cables and scans them against key words, looking for evidence of criminal or other threatening activity (McKay, 1999, May 27). According to a report by the European Parliament, Echelon “works by indiscriminately intercepting very large quantities of communications and then siphoning out what is valuable using artificial intelligence aids” (Wright, 1998). Echelon has been criticized for being a dragnet that surreptitiously and indiscriminately spies on innocent people. Technologies like Intelliseek and Cymfony offer the U.S. military and intelligence potentially new and promising ways to sort, search, and mine the vast person-to-person communication gathered by these systems.

For corporations and their PR agencies, these technologies are useful in tracking and monitoring rumor activity. A Procter & Gamble manager told me that they use a service that “looks at the web and crawls through there and looks for different key words we have supplied” to uncover rumors (Interviewee 1, personal communication, September 23, 2007). A respondent from a major PR agency told me that “our digital division will give ... sometimes twice-a-day reports, sometimes just daily reports on what the blogosphere is saying” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, September 20, 2007). Another respondent mentioned his “routine Internet monitoring” through “things like Nielsen BuzzMetrics or BuzzLogic” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, September 15, 2007). Other companies use Google Alerts, a free service that emails subscribers when a certain term or set of terms (like Walmart AND wages) show up in blogs, the news, video or consumer discussion groups (Interviewee 6, personal communication, August 28, 2007; Interviewee 8, personal communication, November 5, 2007).

Just as the OWI claimed that rumor monitoring was an innovative tool for tracking public opinion, marketers view conversation tracking as a unique and valuable source of consumer intelligence. Services that are used for rumor tracking are also used to explore the attitudes and motivations of people. “View the Internet as a vast, completely uninhibited focus group that can provide insights you’d never get any other way,” says one marketing consultant (Kassel). Indeed, it is this lack of “inhibition,” conceivably since people don’t know their conversations and blog posts are being monitored and mined, that makes online

word of mouth tracking so valuable to companies. As one company providing services in this area explains:

Online dialogue is the digital version of traditional word-of-mouth. Spontaneous and unfiltered, it flows outside the control of companies and marketers, taking place in an atmosphere where candid, thoughtful exchange is encouraged and expected ... A close examination of what's being said can yield intelligence that is far more valuable and accurate than company-solicited feedback. (Kaava, n.d.)

This kind of monitoring can also help uncover and diffuse public criticism. A consulting company reports:

A major sporting goods company used Internet monitoring to uncover an activist group planning a rally to protest the company's employment practices and boycott the company's products. The early "heads up" enabled the company to brief the press in advance. (Kassel)

Rumor Suppression

Once a rumor has been identified, various means are used to suppress it. One common approach is to leverage "third-party" organizations that can lend credibility to a company fighting a rumor. "Enrolling a credible third-party endorser" is one of the "pillars" of Procter & Gamble's rumor response (Interviewee 1, "Issue Management" [Procter & Gamble internal presentation by Terry Loftus, Interviewee 3, and Interviewee 1, February 2, 2006], personal communication, September 23, 2007). In the instance of a rumor that a chemical in Procter & Gamble's Swiffer WetJet product was killing pets, for example,

Procter & Gamble enrolled the American Veterinary Medical Association and the ASPCA to certify that the product was safe (Interviewee 1, personal communication, September 23, 2007). This information was then provided to the Procter & Gamble call center, placed on the product website, and put into “personal letters [that] were sent from P&G to thousands of veterinary leaders and leading pet enthusiasts” (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.). To track the success of these efforts, veterinarians, breeders and consumers were surveyed to “assess the awareness of the rumor and the brand impact of the WetJet email hoax” (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.).

Sometimes third-party relationships are put into place preemptively. This is especially true for products that are expected to generate a degree of controversy, such as those in the pharmaceutical industry. One respondent whose agency’s clients include leading drug manufacturers such as Eli Lilly, Astra Zeneca, Novartis, Pfizer and Schering Plough, told me:

So, I mean, in public relations, you know, you plan for managing rumors, but you never know what the rumor will be. So, for example, some of like our medical–pharmaceutical accounts, if you’re launching a new drug that has potential controversy surrounding it or perceived controversy by certain stakeholders, you’ll put plans into place like a scientific advisory board or a scientific—or just an advisory panel of different experts. Like if you were launching a product for osteoarthritis, you may want to have someone from, you know, the American Academy of the Aging, somebody else from, you know, National Institutes of Health, or whatever it may be to advise you, to be there, to, God forbid, if there is a rumor that comes out, they immediately get pushed out to the media ... We media train them. You know, not telling them exactly what to say, but helping to shape their message so that it best

resonates with the public. (Interviewee 2, personal communication, September 20, 2007)

These third-party groups are not always really third-parties. The web site for “Working Families for Walmart,” for example, an “advocacy group” formed to promote Walmart’s positive contributions to society, was written by three employees of Edelman, Walmart’s PR agency (“PR firm admits it's behind Walmart blogs: Sites that appeared to be grass-roots support for retailer revealed to be backed by Edelman employees.,” 2006, October 20). Edelman even secretly funded a blogging tour by two people claiming to be acting on their own (Edelman, 2006, October 16). These kind of groups are designed to spread positive messages, advocate on behalf of the corporation, and respond in the event of a negative “rumor.” An Edelman executive told me:

You create some sort of group that effectively serves as your voice. Now that can be sort of home grown or it can be, you know, it runs along the spectrum from sort of home grown to completely artificial.... It could be made up of employees themselves ... or it can be sort of under the guise of ... more of the true Joe Blow General Citizen, although he really isn’t kind of thing. And what you’re trying to do is sort of actively promote his point of view, sort of online.... And so for the most part, what you’re doing is you’re playing defense which is you’re responding directly to what the rumor particularly is and you may be trying to change the subject, but you are directly responding to something that somebody else said. (Interviewee 4, personal communication, December 13, 2007)

Third parties can be useful in rumor management in the aura that they give a company or brand. Since rumors are perceived by companies and PR agencies as an attack on the company’s brand, using image management to counter or pre-empt rumors is considered an effective strategy. “Victims of rumors should strive

to be associated with positive impressions to replace negative impressions created by the rumor.... In other words, rumor control should be a multi-pronged approach that may include an outright rebuttal and other reputation-enhancing strategies,” says one manual on rumor control (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, p. 224). These “reputation-enhancing strategies” are particularly important when a corporation is vulnerable to “rumors” based on its corporate actions. As a executive explains:

GE is a great example. Right? This whole Eco-Imagination thing grew out of some bad press they got in and around about the Hudson River and GE and pollution ... And so, in essence, GE says, “Okay, before this sort of blows into anything potentially bigger, we’ve got to be out there sort of increase the association of GE with environmentalism so that if you were to do a national survey and you asked people who the top five or ten companies that you think of when it comes to being green and sustainability and all that stuff, GE is up there.” And so there, you’re in essence, somewhat responding to something you think may happen, but in the larger sense, before it can sort of get out into the mainstream. You’re out there in essence, making sure that when those charges do come, they’re not as likely to stick because people already think of you in a different light. (Interviewee 4, personal communication, December 13, 2007)

In this way, advertising is used as a hedge against rumors and any other kind of negative word of mouth.

Rumors as “negative information”

At its core, rumor control is simply part of the marketing battle to promote positive attitudes towards companies and brands. Rumors are only dangerous

when they hurt a company's image. The word rumor, therefore, has become shorthand for negative word of mouth. One researcher calls rumors a type of "negative information" and talks about rumor study as the study of the "propagation of negative information" (Iyer & Debevec, 1991). Another defines "negative word-of-mouth" as "interpersonal communication among consumers concerning a marketing organization or product which denigrates the object of the communication," and calls rumors "a type of word-of-mouth that is frequently negative in content" (Richins, 1984).

This view, that rumors are negative word of mouth, was validated by the executives to whom I spoke. A VP from Edelman told me that a "rumor in my mind, by definition, is something that's usually negative and usually only loosely based in fact but has potential to do significant damage to you know, your own sort of image and/or other people's perception of you." When I asked him what he would call an unsubstantiated but *positive* message, he said: "That's called getting our story out there." (Interviewee 4, personal communication, December 13, 2007)

This distinction, between a negative "rumor" and "getting our story out there," is the distinction between what PR professionals try to stop and what they try to spread. Colloquially, within public relations, rumors are negative stories. But PR professionals recognize that building a brand image often means igniting the rumor dynamic to create positive word of mouth. In this way, rumors, good and bad, are at the core of the public relations discipline. As one executive explained:

You have positive rumors and negative rumors. A rumor isn't necessarily a bad thing. I could start a rumor that, you know, my penis is twelve inches long. You know? And if that's something I want to be discussed, you know, it's a positive thing. Companies will say, you know, they'll want to get claims about their product that may or may not be true." (Interviewee 9, personal communication, October 7, 2007)

Hence, rumors are really two sides of the same coin, and rumor control is part of the same process through which public relations helps companies. Another executive told me:

I just see it as the proactive PR and then the reactive PR. Like the proactive is the word of mouth, getting people to talk, getting the buzz going, you know, getting that conversation going with the – between the brand and the consumer and the rumor control is the reactivity.... So I definitely see them both as PR. (Interviewee 2, personal communication, September 20, 2007)

In the same way that Project Revere researchers sought to understand which leaflet messages spread through word of mouth channels and why, one executive told me that understanding which messages spread was the "Holy Grail question." This is because knowing what messages spread would arm the PR executive with the ultimate weapon to spread positive stories (Idil Kakim, personal communication, August 28, 2007). In this way, the discipline of rumor control is directly related to the discipline of marketing itself. As the same executive told me:

Oftentimes we're thinking about promoting the message from a marketing perspective. Put the message out there, hopefully we'll be picked up and resonate with people, and this is the same logic I

think in that you're thinking about what you're saying, your content, and the distribution channels and how audiences will react to it. This is the same dynamic. It's just that you're not trying to prevent it from spreading. It's just reverse. (Interviewee 6, personal communication, August 28, 2007)

This task of spreading messages through word of mouth is at the core of public relations itself. Reminiscent of Bernays' "two-way street," the executives I spoke with understood that the key to lasting marketing effectiveness was the creation of a dialogue between the corporation and consumers, and among consumers themselves. As one executive told me:

I guess we call good rumors public relations. If someone is doing something really good, I mean obviously, yeah, we start those rumors. That's my job and [our PR agency's] job. It's to say, "Hey, did you know that Swiffer is partnered with this company making a donation to recognize outstanding children?" Those are good rumors that we want to get placed in the press. (Interviewee 1, personal communication, September 23, 2007)

The Word of Mouth Marketing Industry

In 1967, Johan Arndt lamented that despite the apparent power of word of mouth, it was a channel left largely alone by marketers. Forty years later, this was no longer the case. By the early part of the 21st century, "word of mouth marketing," sometimes called "viral marketing" or "buzz marketing," became one of the hottest corporate marketing trends.

The emergence of word of mouth as a central theme in marketing at the end of the 20th century can be traced to a number of perceived changes in the communication landscape. Adding to Dichter's 1967 revelation that consumers didn't trust advertising, marketers at the turn of the 20th century pointed to problems of media fragmentation, ad-blocking and ad-skipping, decreased attentiveness due to media multi-tasking, mass adoption of the Internet, and an increase in trust in word of mouth itself. When corporations studied word of mouth, they found that its power was growing: The PR firm Edelman reported in 2006 that trust in "a person like yourself or a peer" had increased from 22% to 68% in just three years ("Annual Edelman Trust Barometer," 2006).

While the power of word of mouth was seen as a threat, it also began to be seen as an opportunity, even "the anti-dote to traditional advertising's waning effectiveness," as one marketing consultant put it (Nail, 2005). "Word of mouth is ten times more effective than TV or print," according to one proponent (Hughes, 2005, p. 223). This hyperbolic rhetoric was emblematic of a tidal wave of books were published touting the opportunity for companies to build brands and sell products. The books have titles such as: *Buzzmarketing: Get People to Talk About Your Stuff*; *Creating Customer Evangelists*; *PyroMarketing: The Four-Step Strategy to Ignite Customer Evangelists and Keep Them for Life*; *Unleashing the Ideavirus*; *Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking*; and *The Tipping Point*, which as of January 2008 had spent more than three years on the New York Times best-seller list. These books (and countless related articles) describe word of mouth as a revolution that has

upended traditional marketing. “It is a mysterious, invisible force. Despite all its overwhelming power, like the wind of a hurricane or the neutrons of a nuclear chain reaction, it is invisible” (Silverman, 1997, p. 32) according to one author. In contrast to literature on rumors, which talk in dire terms about word of mouth, these books and articles talk with almost evangelical fervor about the opportunity the word of mouth channel provides:

Word-of-mouth is a marketer’s dream. It’s the most powerful, adaptable, fast-moving communications medium on the planet. Millions of people talking about your product—what could be more spectacular? (Balter & Butman, 2005, p. 161)

One of the more popular books, which according to the author was downloaded one million times (Godin), is called *Unleashing the IdeaVirus*, written by Seth Godin, an entrepreneur who sold his promotions company to Yahoo! and became a popular keynote speaker. Godin’s book captures many of the themes of word of mouth marketing, mainly that the age of traditional, one-way advertising is over and that a new age, in which marketers create idea “viruses” that spread in populations, has become marketing’s new discipline. Godin writes:

Advertisers spent the better part of the 20th century trying to control and measure and manipulate the spread of information—to count the number of eyes and ears that they could reach with a single message. But this notion says that the most successful ideas are those that spread and grow because of the customer’s relationship to other customers—not the marketer’s to the customer.... In traditional interruption marketing, the marketer talks directly to as many consumers as possible, with no intermediary other than the media company.... In creating an ideavirus, the advertiser creates an environment in which the idea can replicate and spread. It’s the virus that does the work, not the marketer. (Godin, 2001, p. 13, 25-26)

Reprising Lazarsfeld's two-step flow hypothesis, Godin prescribes that marketers target "sneezers" who spread the "ideavirus," and, like most other books in the genre, provides an illustration of a one-way communication model with a "new" one that shows a message passing from person to person (ibid.). Malcolm Gladwell, in his fabulously successful book *The Tipping Point*, offers a very similar idea. "The best way to understand the ... phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do." (Gladwell, 2002, p. 7)

Inspired by this rhetoric, and new word of mouth monitoring and measuring technologies, the marketing industry rallied around word of mouth as a new way of influencing consumers. Just as agencies spread rumors in the 1930s to drum up interest about products, marketers at the turn of the 21st century began widespread efforts to directly employ people and consumers to spread messages about products through word of mouth.

One of the ways word of mouth is generated is through "stealth" or "guerrilla" marketing. These efforts are designed to seize the attention of consumers who might otherwise ignore marketing messages. As one writer explains:

Since wary and cynical viewers are bombarded with an ever-increasing number of advertising messages, they immediately tend to put up their defenses as they detect they are being sold something.

Marketers must therefore rely on more subtle methods of communicating a message to their consumers. Stealth marketing attempts to catch people at their most vulnerable by identifying the weak spot in their defensive shields.... Basically, stealth marketing attempts to present a new product or service by cleverly creating and spreading “buzz” in an obtuse or surreptitious manner. (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004)

One stealth marketing tactic is to hire actors that pose as everyday people, and get them to use, recommend, or give away a product. This can include using “leaners” in a bar who order a certain brand of alcohol in a way that gets noticed by other bar patrons; using pretty women to flirt with and offer a new brand of cigarette to men; and using fashionable-looking people to chat up a new artist in a record store (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004). The goal is to use the power of word of mouth as a high-powered advertising medium: “By generating word-of-mouth to create ‘authentic’ experiences, viral marketing attempts to harness the strongest of all consumer triggers—the personal recommendation” (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004).

This tactic of using people to talk up a product is being used by the world’s largest companies on an unprecedented scale. Procter & Gamble, the world’s largest advertiser, created a business unit called Tremor, which provides free products and other incentives to hundreds of thousands of teenagers who agree to spread the word about products. As an article in Forbes describes:

They are 280,000 strong, ages 13 to 19, all of them enlisted by an arm of Procter & Gamble called Tremor. Their mission is to help companies plant information about their brands in living rooms, schools and other crevices that are difficult for corporate America to

infiltrate. These kids deliver endorsements in school cafeterias, at sleepovers, by cell phone and by e-mail. They are being tapped to talk up just about everything, from movies to milk and motor oil—and they do it for free. (Wells, 2004, February 2)

Tremor claims to screen for teen “connectors” who function as opinion leaders among their friends. According to Tremor figures, approximately 1% of the U.S. teen population participates (Wells, 2004, February 2). Procter & Gamble developed a similar service that targets mothers, another major marketing target. This service, called VocalPoint, claims to have “enlisted a stealth army of 600,000 moms who chat up its products” (Berner, 2006, May 29).

Whether it is fake tourists in the street, “leaners” at a bar, or teens recruited over the Internet to talk up a new product, word of mouth marketing is widely described as a new and supercharged marketing channel. But the concept of word of mouth has grown even larger than that: increasingly, it is even described as the end goal of marketing itself. “Here’s an idea to save traditional media. What if marketers and agencies viewed every ad they create and buy as a medium for word-of-mouth” writes a marketing pundit for BusinessWeek (Kiley, 2007, November 15). Or, as I wrote in an article in the Journal of Advertising Research:

How do we reconcile this “contradiction” between what marketers do (buy advertising spots) and believe (that WOM drives purchase)? The only rational way to resolve it would be to point to proof that advertising actually stimulates positive word of mouth about brands. This could be grounded in the “two-step flow” communication model, where mass persuasion drives person-to-person influence. Without this proof, the vast majority of brand marketing dollars would be bypassing what has been shown to be the primary point of influence. (Graham & Havlena, 2007)

The concept of the power of word of mouth has created a whole industry made up of companies specializing in stimulating, measuring and tracking word of mouth, which has grown extremely quickly. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) was formed in 2004 “To distinguish and define the structure and objectives of authentic word-of-mouth marketing and measurement programs, with an overall goal of maintaining the validity and authenticity of word-of-mouth as a controllable and applicable medium” (WOMMA). One of the founders was Pete Blackshaw, the Procter & Gamble brand manager and founder of CIA-funded Intelliseek. A year later, 43% of marketing executives surveyed by CMO magazine said they planned “to use WOM [word of mouth] in the next 6 months” (Keller, Green, & Wester, 2006). By the end of 2007, WOMMA had more than 400 corporate members, including all of the top PR agencies and leading corporations such as Coca Cola, Apple, Johnson & Johnson, and Walt Disney (“[WOMMA membership list],” January 4, 2008). By then, the word of mouth marketing industry was estimated to have grown to more than 1 billion dollars in total revenue (“Word-of-Mouth Marketing spending to top \$1B in '07,” 2007, November 19).

These methods have led to some backlash among consumer groups and in the press. In 2005, the group “Commercial Alert” requested that the FTC investigate the word of mouth industry for deceptive marketing practices. “There is evidence that some of these companies are perpetrating large-scale deception upon consumers by deploying buzz marketers who fail to disclose that they have been enlisted to promote products,” the letter wrote (Ruskin, 2005, October 18). In

response, some companies are avoiding stealth approaches. In February of 2005, WOMMA released its ethics guidelines (WOMMA, 2005), which included “never obscure your identity” and “say who you’re speaking for.” While companies like Vocalpoint and Tremor now claim to direct their legions of buzz-generators to reveal that they are receiving incentives for talking up products, it is impossible to determine if the hundreds of thousands of people who spread buzz for these firms ever comply.

Word of Mouth Marketing: A Mini-Case Study

In July 2002, Sony Ericsson prepared the launch of a new cell phone, called the T68i, which was one of the first cell phones with a digital camera to hit the American market. Sony Ericsson’s marketing strategy was to start with a “buzz” campaign that would introduce this innovative feature and build demand, followed by a more traditional advertising campaign once the product became available. The purpose of the “buzz” phase was, according to an agency executive who worked on the campaign, to “tease” consumers into wanting the product even though it wasn’t available. This strategy was meant to take advantage of “scarcity as a motivator for desire” (Interviewee 10, personal communication, January 4, 2008).

A key part of the buzz campaign was an initiative called “Fake Tourist,” which was executed in seven U.S. cities (Veranica, 2001, July 31). The effort involved trained actors who posed as tourists and asked passersby on city streets to take

their photograph with the new T68i. Given that camera phone technology was new in the U.S., the stunt was meant to introduce “people [who] often have filters up around marketing” to the camera in a way that would be memorable. In a nutshell, the core marketing idea behind “Fake Tourist” was: “When you see it in action, then you actually create desire” (Interviewee 10, personal communication, January 4, 2008). According to the executive who planned the effort, the actors who were hired by the company operated on a fine line between simple deception and outright salesmanship. This preserved the (false) authenticity of the encounter and also provided a plausible denial that the stunt was completely unethical.

I want everything to be organic based on the response the consumer gave. If I went up to someone and said “Hey can you take my picture?” and they took the phone and they pressed the button and they gave it back to me—that was the entire communication. If someone said “wow I’ve never seen this tell me about it,” then I would say, “yes, I’m happy to tell you about this”—but I am not going to say “this is the best thing since sliced bread.” I’m going to say here’s what it does, here’s how I use it ... If they ask how much it costs I say “I got it on a deal, but I think it costs around 90 bucks.” It’s not like, hey, it’s available at \$99.95 at Best Buy. (Interviewee 10, personal communication, January 4, 2008)

Besides “Fake Tourist,” as part of its buzz effort Sony Ericsson employed pretty women, “leaners,” who used the new phone in bars and tried to strike up conversations about it. Combined, these two buzz marketing efforts, stretched over 60 days, cost the company 5 million dollars (Veranica, 2001, July 31).

The day before the buzz campaign began, an article describing the campaign was published in the Wall Street Journal. The article quoted several people who were critical of the campaign. A marketing executive called the campaign “reprehensible and desperate.” A representative from Commercial Alert, an organization whose mission is to “protect communities from commercialism,” called the campaign “deceptive.” The article helped generate a small public outcry about stealth marketing. The investigative TV show “60 Minutes” cited “Fake Tourist” in a segment titled “Undercover Marketing Uncovered,” which led with the line “60 Minutes has a report on some covert operations being conducted right here in the United States—not by the CIA or FBI—but by Madison Avenue.” Referring to Sony Ericsson’s actors in Time Square, the report said: “They once picked pockets, but now, they mess with your mind” (“Undercover marketing uncovered: Hidden cameras capture salespeople secretly pitching products,” 2004, July 25). The report quotes none other than Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*, saying that “Companies who engage in this practice are courting ... backlash. And that’s a very, very dangerous thing to play with” (“Undercover marketing uncovered: Hidden cameras capture salespeople secretly pitching products,” 2004, July 25). The market research firm Forrester implied that this backlash actually took place, saying in a report that “once the ‘tourist’ launched into a highly-scripted sales pitch, the consumers realized the charade and felt Ericsson had abused their trust” (Nail, 2005). Commercial Alert would later cite the campaign in a letter to the FTC asking it to regulate “buzz” and “stealth” marketing, claiming it is “a deceptive practice” proscribed by law (Ruskin, 2005, October 18). In response to the request, the FTC declined to

initiate a broad investigation of the industry, but rather said it would act on a “case by case basis” (Anderson, 2006, December 13).

But this outcry was contained and was outweighed by the benefits of the campaign, according to the ad executive I spoke to. “My guess is that you had a couple of vocal people on the ground that said ‘I feel deceived.’ out of ... my guess is 150,000 people,” he said (Interviewee 10, personal communication, January 4, 2008). The campaign still continues to be cited as an innovative and effective marketing effort in industry conferences.

The Power Dynamic

Throughout the history of rumor control, rumors have been seen a threat to the maintenance of control. This is no less true in the present day, when themes of power are explicit in the marketing literature about rumors. In fact, recent technological advancements have ratcheted up the fear that marketers feel when confronted with word of mouth communication. As one consultant reports:

“Now, on the Internet, customers can spread rumors (true or false) ... ‘A guy living in his basement can bring the studios to their knees’” (Rosen, 2000, p. 17).

The idea that rumors and other word of mouth communication can erode the power of corporations became rampant in marketing by 2007. References to the “empowered consumer,” or statements that “the consumer is in control,” became a common refrain in marketing conferences and writing. This reflected a

perception that the power of word of mouth was challenging corporate dominance.

In October 2007, Forrester Research, a leading industry analysis firm, released a presentation called “Your Customers are Revolting :)”. The presentation begins with several slides showing images of revolutionaries and street demonstrations, including a Civil Rights march and an attack on a castle. “Why are your customers revolting?” the presentation asks. “You’re shouting. You don’t listen. They can talk to each other now.... To keep power, you have to share it. Tap the revolutionary spirit within yourself and your organization to drive reformation,” the presentation concludes, with the picture of the hordes scaling a castle wall (Li, October 11, 2007).

This same idea of consumer revolt idea is expressed in a short video circulated by Technorati, a blog search web site, and shown to advertising agencies and leading marketers at conferences and private meetings. With only a wisp of irony, the narrator of the animated video warns marketers of the power they have lost:

No one would have believed, in the closing years of the 20th century, that our most popular media was being watched, in a new way, by a force that was quietly gathering strength. With blind confidence, we considered them our own, our audience, our subscribers, our cuddly couch potatoes. With infinite complacency we blithely segmented and sold them to advertisers. We learned to shape their habits, mold their desires, and give them the illusion of infinite choice. Yet from their side of the screen, with envious eyes, they studied us. And bit by bit they learned, and linked, and drew their plans against us, wielding weapons we ourselves provided. And then, early in the 21st century came the great unraveling....

They pounced and they blogged and they blew the house down....
They have tasted power, and there are a lot more of them than there
are of us. ("Day of the long tail [video]")

While marketers fear that word of mouth is cutting in to their control over consumers, experts in the field advise that the only way to win the power back is to turn word of mouth to the corporation's own advantage. Just as Bernays talked about creating a "two-way street" between the company and the public, and the Air Force looked for ways to use people to diffuse its messages, marketers in the early 21st century exhort one another to "embrace" word of mouth and turn it to their advantage. One word of mouth consultant writes:

We have to know the nature of the beast before there is any chance of taming it, harnessing it, and directing its power. Then we have to monitor and track it, to sneak up on it and observe it. Then, and only then, can we learn how to speed it up, change its direction, and turn it into a stampede toward our product. (Silverman, 1997, p. 33)

Ultimately, the phenomenon of word of mouth is leading marketers away from one-way advertising and more towards approaches that attempt to bring a corporation in a "conversation" with the consumer. This shift, however, is only a strategic one; the goals of shaping attitudes and behavior remain the same. In this way, the themes of power, surveillance and social control run through the history of rumor control, and marketing, all the way to the present day.

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