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On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, And What Can Be Done



Synopsis

Many of us are being misled. Claiming to know dark secrets about public officials, hidden causes of the current economic situation, and nefarious plans and plots, those who spread rumors know precisely what they are doing. And in the era of social media and the Internet, they know a lot about how to manipulate the mechanics of false rumors—social cascades, group polarization, and biased assimilation. They also know that the presumed correctives—publishing balanced information, issuing corrections, and trusting the marketplace of ideas—do not always work. All of us are vulnerable. In *On Rumors*, Cass Sunstein uses examples from the real world and from behavioral studies to explain why certain rumors spread like wildfire, what their consequences are, and what we can do to avoid being misled. In a new afterword, he revisits his arguments in light of his time working in the Obama administration.

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Customer Reviews

"With clear examples and lucid arguments, *On Rumors* couldn't come at a better time in the country's increasingly divisive--and deceptive--public discourse."--Seed
"In revealing how easily and blindly we accept rumors, Sunstein's book is likely to make readers think twice before believing or repeating the next bit of gossip that comes through the grapevine."--Sarah Halzack, *Washington Post*
"Raises fundamental questions about the troublingly ambiguous impact of social media on the marketplace of democratic ideas."--Michael Ignatieff, *Foreign Affairs*
"Full of insights into the dynamics of information flow and why mud sticks in some places and not others."--Michael Bond,

"It often seems that rumors are the one element that can travel faster than the speed of light. In *On Rumors*, Cass Sunstein helps us understand their incredible appeal, their power, and their dangers. A fun-tastic book."--Dan Ariely, James B. Duke Professor of Behavioral Economics, Duke University, and author of *Predictably Irrational*

BOOK REVIEW: SUNSTEIN, Cass, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can Be Done* ISBN-13: 978-0691162508 This is a short, precisely 100-page long essay on rumors, why falsehoods spread and why people believe them, written by a Harvard Law scholar. The book deals more with cognitive social psychology than with law. The author states that even sensible, smart people believe rumors. He then discusses some examples and the harm caused, magnified as it is in the Internet Era, and asks why do rumors spread. He discusses several factors, such as people's initial convictions; the way human cognition works, our tendency to look for information that confirms what we already know and to discard information that contradicts it. Rumor transmission is often associated with cascade effects and group polarization, concepts with which the author deals at some length. He then notes the traditional way of fighting rumors, which is exposing people to different, sometimes informed, balanced views (a model called "marketplace of ideas") does not always work, because of the phenomena of biased assimilation and polarization. He discusses whether imposing liabilities on rumor propagators would be a good thing, because such risk of liability could also have a bad side effect of chilling out truth tellers from speaking their minds. It was more than just a good book for me, because it also made me think and ask new questions. That these new questions were not dealt with is what prevents me from qualifying the book as excellent. Sunstein's frequent use of the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor refers to concepts pertaining our cultural inheritance from Greek Stoicism: the civilizational power of rational communication, which shapes savage human beings into civilized persons, in the political arena as well in the marketplace. However, this reference was not hinted at in the book. When introduced to ancient Rome by Panaetius, these ideas engendered the Western ideas of free speech and due process, as well as our ways to deal with the vices which can poison free will in business dealings. It was out of Stoic influence that Romans spoke of error (when substantial and excusable) as something voiding a contract. Error (and rumors are a repetition of errors) is different from "dolus", the intentional misleading of others into error. The systematic and intentional kindling of existing rumors in the marketplace, or inception of new ones, is called manipulation. Sunstein diagnoses the

problem he deals with as rumors. I believe his diagnosis is lacking: his problem is actually manipulation. Thus, he does not answer the question whether it would be a better solution to fight intentional manipulation, instead of curbing the sometimes, and somewhat, innocent propagation of rumors. This is not Sunstein's fault: he wrote the book he wanted to write (which is a very good one), not the one I'd wish to have read. It is about rumors, not about manipulation. I liked reading it, but I'm still wanting a more comprehensive treatment of the subject.

Sunstein has been able to describe mechanics of how and why rumors spread relatively well. But while he showed the problem of rumors, he offered very little, if any, ways to confront rumors. I picked up the book with hopes to find some solutions, I was a bit disappointed. I would also say that the book could have been much shorter, there were new ideas in the first half of the book, but he kept repeating himself in the second part of the book.

Simple book about rumours, Hoped for more depth into different angles about the topic. Some solutions to solve it would've been good to add as well

Though bound to draw the ire of dedicated ideologues, this book takes on a complex topic and attempts to draw apart the elements of how and why people are drawn to narratives for which there is little or no evidence.

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