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## Have You Heard? The Rumour as Reliable

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### Abstract

Drawing on work by philosophers CAJ Coady and David Coady on the epistemology of rumours, I develop a theory which exploits the distinction between rumouring and rumour-mongering for the purpose of explaining why we should treat rumours as a species of justified belief.

Whilst it is true that rumour-mongering, the act of passing on a rumour maliciously, presents a pathology of the normally reliable transmission of rumours, I will argue that rumours themselves have a generally reliable transmission process, that of rumouring, and should be considered to be examples of warranted beliefs.

My argument will also touch on the association of rumours with another class of beliefs that are usually considered to be suspect, conspiracy theories. I will argue that whilst rumours are reliable (as a mechanism for the transmission of justified beliefs) the analysis of the transmission of conspiracy theories requires us to realise they are different to rumours in some important respects.

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<sup>2</sup>I should like to acknowledge the feedback I received on this paper from Drs. Jonathan McKeown-Green and Justine Kingsbury, as well as a third person who does not want to be named. This unnamed person, along with Giovanni Tiso, Nathan Grange and Paul Litterick were also instrumental in stripping out most (hopefully) of the many spelling errors and grammatical mistakes that were introduced when I turned a chapter of my PhD dissertation into the paper you are reading today.

# 1 Introduction

Rumours are often considered to be examples of unwarranted beliefs: the spreading of rumours is often considered to be a pathological form of the otherwise reliable transmission process we normally associate with testimony. I wish to argue that the transmission process of rumours is, contrary to what most people think, reliable. However, to do this requires that I distinguish between the act of *rumouring* and the problematic act of *rumour-mongering*, which is an unreliable and malicious transmission process. I will then compare and contrast rumours with conspiracy theories, which are sometimes thought to suffer from similar flaws.

I shall define a rumour as being:

An unverified proposition which has been heard by an agent  
and then expressed to another agent.

a definition which I take it is in line with how we commonly define a rumour.

I think it is crucial to any definition of a rumour that the hearer must have a belief that the rumour they are considering, which has been uttered by some speaker, is plausible: i.e. the hearer thinks that it might be true. I will work with a notion of plausibility, rather than truth, when I am talking about the transmission of rumours and I will combine it with an appeal to trust in order to characterise what I take to be a reliable transmission process. Plausibility, as I use it, is a kind of coherence notion: a proposition conveyed by a speaker is plausible to some hearer when it does not contradict/is not defeated by the hearer's other beliefs. The transmission of a belief between the utterer of a rumour and the hearer of said rumour is successful when the hearer trusts the speaker and the content of the speaker's utterance coheres with the beliefs of the hearer.

Let me give an example which contrasts the act of testifying, which we normally take to be a reliable process of transmitting propositional beliefs, with the act of what I call "rumouring," the passing on of a rumour.

Amanda and Ewan are discussing office politics. Amanda knows that Cindy, their boss, is dating Alice, who was recently fired. Amanda is curious to know when Cindy and Alice started dating; was it before or after she was dismissed from the workplace? As Amanda knows firsthand that Cindy and Alice are dating, she is able to pass this on to

Ewan, who inherits the justified belief that Cindy and Alice are dating because Amanda has successfully testified to that fact<sup>1</sup>.

Ewan has heard that Cindy and Alice spent an inordinate amount of time in Cindy's bedroom at a party some five months ago so, when Amanda tells Ewan that Cindy and Alice started dating, he expresses what he has heard about Cindy, Alice, the bedroom and the excessive amount of time they spent not engaging in the party all those months ago.

Now, Ewan does not know that this occurred; it is not a justified true belief that he holds but *merely* something he has heard. Furthermore, he is not claiming to have any justified belief on this matter. Ewan, in this case, is spreading a rumour. This rumour is plausible to Ewan because it fits with Ewan's other beliefs and is not inconsistent with Amanda's testimony, which he has recently come to believe.

I propose that what Ewan is doing here is a textbook case of the kind of thing that happens when we engage in rumouring: we express what we take to be plausible claims to other members of our

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<sup>1</sup>The definition of testimony I am using comes from Jennifer Lackey's introduction to 'The Epistemology of Testimony' (Lackey and Sosa, 2006), a recent survey volume which I take to be representative of the contemporary epistemological views of testimony. Lackey's definition of the act of testifying is as follows:

T: S testifies that *p* by making an act of communication *a* if and only if (in part) in virtue of *as* communicable content,  
(1) S reasonably intends to convey the information that *p*, or  
(2) *a* is reasonably taken as conveying the information that *p*. (Lackey, 2006, p. 3)

The major debate in the epistemology of testimony is whether, when a speaker testifies, the hearer can inherit, by virtue of hearing some piece of testimony, a justified true belief.

If a piece of testimony is to be properly treated as warranted by the hearer it must, necessarily, be a justified belief that the speaker holds and this belief must not be one that is contrary to the beliefs the hearer holds. For the transmission of some piece of testimony to be successful the speaker must assert their justified belief and the hearer must trust the speaker. If a hearer trusts some speaker and the speaker testifies, then the hearer, should they have no defeater belief with respect to the piece of testimony, should inherit belief in the proposition; this is the trusting transmission of testimony.

community, effectively asking them if what we have said coheres with what they believe. Rumouring, I believe, is a kind of fact-checking.

Ewan thinks that his claim about Cindy and Alice is plausible, but should Amanda say “No, that can’t be the case; I know that Cindy and Errol were an item at the time, and Cindy is a serial monogamist!” then Ewan, if he trusts Amanda (say, as a reliable source of information about Cindy), should accept that the rumour is no longer plausible because it not only fails to cohere with Amanda’s beliefs but it now fails to cohere with his beliefs (because, accepting Amanda’s testimony to the contrary, Ewan now knows something more about Cindy, something that makes his rumour implausible). However, if Amanda says “Yes, that makes sense: I saw Cindy and Alice kissing at that party five months ago,” then what Ewan has heard will be all the more plausible to both Ewan and Amanda (because it now not only coheres with Ewan’s other beliefs but it also coheres with those of Amanda). If Amanda has nothing to contribute in this matter, then Ewan or Amanda might go and ask someone else, to test out the plausibility of the rumour.

## **2 Rumouring vs. gossiping**

Some people might object to the kind of story I am telling about rumouring here by saying something like “Surely what you have presented here is a case of gossiping?” because gossiping and rumouring might be thought to be the same kind of activity. I disagree, and here is why.

Gossiping is a morally suspicious activity; when you gossip behind someone’s back you are asserting, as true, some belief about someone that they do not want spread, or would be pleased to know you are spreading<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Now, you could (and should) ask “Can gossip be rumour and rumour gossip?” It is not irrational to think that people are easily confused as to whether what they have heard is gossip or rumour. For one thing, people are not usually in the habit of expressly marking out whether they are gossiping or spreading a rumour. I might just assume that you know when I am doing one or the other, or I might inadvertently use some ambiguous locution that confuses the issue. For another thing, I might deliberately misrepresent some piece of rumour as gossip; I overstate my case because the person I am rumour-mongering about, say, has done something to irritate me.

In my example, Amanda knows that Cindy and Alice are dating but she does not know when they started dating. Ewan has only heard that they spent an inordinate amount of time in Cindy's bedroom at a party some five months ago but he believes this to be plausible (as it is not incoherent with his other beliefs about Cindy and Alice). He is not asserting that this is the case; rather, he is expressing what he takes to be a plausible belief about Cindy and Alice, and such expressions are not cases of gossiping. Gossip occurs when one person transmits what they know about someone to another: it is a kind of malicious testimony.

The second reason as to why Ewan is not gossiping is that even if Ewan knows that Cindy and Alice spent an inordinate amount of time in Cindy's bedroom at a party some five months ago it is not obvious, in this case, that Cindy and Alice would object to him telling Amanda about this. Whilst Ewan is, on some level, talking behind the backs of Cindy and Alice, there is nothing inherently morally suspicious about what he is doing here; perhaps Ewan is too embarrassed to ask Cindy and Alice, which is why this conversation is going on without their input, or maybe Cindy is not at work today, and so forth.

This is an important point about rumours; whilst it is always morally suspect<sup>3</sup> to gossip about someone (because gossiping requires you to assert information about someone who does not want said information asserted) behind their back, it is not necessarily morally suspicious to engage in rumouring. To engage in rumouring, I believe, is to engage in a process of assessing whether certain beliefs are plausible; it is a kind of fact-checking and whilst sometimes the content of such rumours will be material the subjects of said rumour would object to being aired, this will not always be the case. Thus, there is nothing morally suspicious *per se* about rumouring, unlike in the case of gossiping.

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<sup>3</sup>I say "morally suspect" rather than "morally wrong" because, whilst gossiping is a morally suspicious activity, it need not be considered an activity which is actually morally wrong. For example: You might not like it that I gossiped to a police officer about your larcenous ways (thus I act in a morally suspicious manner with respect to our friendship) but my reporting on such suspicious behaviour to a relevant authority is not itself an example of an *prima facie* immoral act on my part.

### 3 CAJ Coady on rumours

The philosopher CAJ Coady, in his article ‘Pathologies of Testimony,’ contrasts rumours with gossip. He argues that gossip is just a normal form of testimony, albeit a type that is restricted to the personal and can have malicious character<sup>4</sup>. Gossip is reliable, according to CAJ Coady, because gossip is usually firsthand and is presented as being plausible. If you have a piece of gossip, then you have an example of a plausible belief that was formed by some immediate experience which you then passed on to a hearer like me in a single-step transmission process. If I trust you, as the speaker, then I will acquire the belief, the piece of gossip, which I will also regard as being plausible.

One way to see this is with the locution. Gossip, according to CAJ Coady, is usually prefaced with “Did you know?” (or some synonymous locution). When you gossip you are testifying to that belief. If you believe that the testimony-transmission process is reliable, then gossip, as a form of testimony, is a reliable source of justified beliefs.

CAJ Coady argues, however, that the transmission of rumours is a misfire, or pathology, of the transmission process we associate with testimony. He gives two reasons for this verdict:

[R]umour can arise from the merest speculation. Furthermore, the speaker of rumour will often have no competence with regard to the “information” conveyed and may well be aware of that. If we think some degree of authority or competence, no matter how minimal, is a precondition for giving testimony then quite a lot of rumour will be disqualified as testimony.<sup>5</sup>

Rumours, according to CAJ Coady, are not reliable and this is evident in their locution. Rumours are introduced, he argues, with “Have you heard?”<sup>6</sup> which suggests that the speaker of rumour, unlike the speaker

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<sup>4</sup>Coady, C. A. J. 2006. Pathologies of Testimony. In *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. J. Lackey and E. Sosa, pp. 254–62. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup>Coady, C. A. J. 2006. Pathologies of Testimony. In *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. J. Lackey and E. Sosa, p. 265. Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup>Coady, C. A. J. 2006. Pathologies of Testimony. In *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. J. Lackey and E. Sosa, p. 262. Oxford University Press.

of gossip, does not believe the proposition they are expressing is plausible<sup>7</sup>.

I think presenting rumouring as testifying-gone-wrong is a slight mischaracterisation of the act of rumouring. I think that when someone says “Have you heard?” they are typically asking whether the rumour they have heard is something you, another epistemic agent, can either confirm or deny. When you testify, you assert some proposition; you convey that you take it to be justified. However, rumourers express what they take to be plausible propositions in order to see if others find them plausible. When you assert a rumour you are making some claim that you have heard something you took to be plausible. As I will argue, this process of fact-finding or fact-checking is a reliable one. Its reliability is not due to its being like the act of testifying but rather because the longer a rumour survives the process of being audited by the hearers it is passed on to, the more likely it is to be considered plausible.

That being said, I think that CAJ Coady’s criticism of rumour could be based on the locution “Rumour has it...” which I think does signal that the speaker is *merely* transmitting a rumour they have heard without necessarily worrying about whether the rumour is plausible. The locution “Rumour has it...” I think, carries with it no implication that the speaker thinks the belief being conveyed is plausible; it merely

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<sup>7</sup>A recent paper by Margaret A. Cuonzo, ‘Gossip: An Intention-Based Account,’ presents a slightly different view of gossip. Cuonzo’s paper focuses on the morally suspicious nature of gossiping. She characterises the transmission of gossiping thusly:

In uttering *p*, A gossips to B about C if, and only if (i) A believes that C would not like A to reveal the information contained in *p* to B; (ii) A would be disinclined to utter *p* to B with C present; (iii) A believes that uttering *p* will be pleasurable to A and/or B; and (iv) *p* contains information about C. (Cuonzo 2008, p. 132)

Cuonzo’s view of gossip and gossiping deals with the furtive nature of gossip; how the speaker of some piece of gossip believes that the subject of said gossip would not like the gossip to be disseminated. Cuonzo’s account is centered on the beliefs and intentions of the speaker of gossip rather than its veristic nature but, in its relevant features, provides the same kind of transmission story as that of CAJ Coady’s.

suggests that the speaker has heard a rumour and is passing it on<sup>8</sup>. Of course, not all rumours are clearly marked and thus some instances of someone rumouring in a “Rumour has it...” sense will be taken to be instances of “Have you heard...” rumours.

CAJ Coady is concerned that the speaker of some rumour might even embellish their rumour, possibly to make a better story, add some detail or simply because they can: this possibility makes it all the less likely that the transmission process of rumours can be considered reliable<sup>9</sup>. Now, I think this worry about the embellishment of rumours is interesting because I think this drives CAJ Coady’s argument that the transmission of rumours is a pathological form of the transmission process of testimony. Whilst I think there are concerns that need to be addressed with respect to whether rumourers will embellish their rumours and what that means for the reliability of the transmission of rumours, I will argue that rumouring, as a kind of fact-finding or fact-checking is a reliable one because the longer a rumour survives being audited, the more likely it is to be plausible or even true.

#### **4 David Coady on rumours**

David Coady, in his article ‘Rumour Has It,’ argues that the transmission of rumours is a process that is more reliable than we might normally think. He argues:

...[M]any rumours are credible (that is, it is rational to believe them), and that in general the fact that a proposition is rumoured to be true is evidence in favour of it being true.<sup>10</sup>

David Coady argues that rumours are expressed in a community of speakers and hearers, all of whom are able to check and analyse the content of the rumours they hear and, potentially, then pass them on.

To begin with, for a communication to be a rumour, it must have ‘spread’ through a number of informants (i.e.,

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<sup>8</sup>Which might be explicable with respect to certain glosses on the etiquette of group communication, et cetera.

<sup>9</sup>Coady, C. A. J. 2006. Pathologies of Testimony. In *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. J. Lackey and E. Sosa, p. 263. Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup>Coady, D. 2006. Rumour Has It. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1), pp. 41-2.



[rumourers]<sup>11</sup>). ...Furthermore, the number of informants through which a rumour has spread must be quite large. No second-hand account of an event can be a rumour, though it may be more of a rumour than a first-hand account. In general, the further a rumour has spread, the more fully it deserves the name.<sup>12</sup>

David Coady thinks that the worry CAJ Coady has about rumours, that they will end up being embellished (or in the worst case scenario, be total fabrications) is reduced or even eliminated by the checks and balances of the transmission process.

[A]ll else being equal, the greater the reliability of those who spread a rumour, the more likely it is to survive and spread. Hence, if you hear a rumour, it is not only *prima facie* evidence that it has been thought plausible by a large number of people, it is also *prima facie* evidence that it has been thought plausible by a large number of reliable people. And that really is *prima facie* evidence that it is true.<sup>13</sup>

David Coady is arguing that if a rumour survives the checks and balances of its transmission process, then it is because at least some hearers in the community will be interested in either confirming or denying the rumours they hear and that this is a *prima facie* reason to think the rumour true.

The process of checks and balances in the process of rumouring assumes mutual trust: I, as a rumourer, express a rumour to you. You trust me to express it sincerely and I trust you to either confirm or deny the rumour (or, at the very least, say whether you think it coheres with respect to your other beliefs).

If we take our community of agents to consist of mostly trustworthy speakers, then, I argue, it is the plausibility of a given rumour that we should be concerned with. As a rumour spreads, the plausibility of it to the community of speakers and hearers as a whole will take on more and more importance. A single hearer might well find that the belief coheres with her other beliefs, but that hearer might be anomalous.

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<sup>11</sup>David Coady uses word “rumour-monger” rather than “rumourer” but I have reserved that term to describe something different, as will become apparent later in the paper.

<sup>12</sup>Coady, D. 2006. Rumour Has It. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1), p. 42.

<sup>13</sup>Coady, D. 2006. Rumour Has It. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1), p. 47.

They may not be normal, with respect to the group, in the beliefs that they hold. As the rumour spreads further through the community, however, it will be checked and analysed by more and more hearers and, should it not cohere with their beliefs, it is likely to stop being transmitted<sup>14</sup>.

So, with respect to David Coady's thesis about the likely truth of a rumour as it spreads further and further in a community, I say, given my coherence notion of plausibility, that if a rumour spreads widely through a community without encountering defeater beliefs, then such a rumour could be considered to be superbly plausible to the community as a whole. As a rumour spreads it will inevitably encounter more in the way of interested hearers who will not pass on the proposition unless it is considered plausible, which is to say it coheres with their own beliefs.

This is not to say that belief in rumours is always warranted, because the activity of what I will call "rumour-mongering" represents a pathology of the normally reliable transmission process of rumours. However, I will argue that there is a case to be made that belief in the substance of particular rumours is generally warranted, all things being equal.

## **5 Rumouring vs. rumour-mongering**

The normal and, I claim, typically reliable transmission of rumours, rumouring, can be contrasted with rumour-mongering, which is the pathology of rumouring. Rumouring, as I have argued, is typically a kind of fact-finding: we hear something, think it sounds plausible and then spread it on to someone else in the hope that they will confirm it, deny it, or pass it on so it can be confirmed or denied by someone else. Rumour-mongering, however, is not a fact-finding activity but rather the *mere* spreading of a rumour. I say "mere" here because, unlike typical rumouring, which, when all goes well, is the trustworthy transmission of plausible beliefs between speakers and hearers,

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<sup>14</sup>This is an empirical claim but one that I think is likely to be true. This is a line that Cass Sunstein runs in his book "On Rumours" (Sunstein 2009, p. 21). Sunstein argues that a rumour can be countered by a defeater belief. As long as the hearer of some piece of rumour trusts the source of the defeater belief and the hearer does not have a strong commitment to the truth of the rumour, then the presence of a defeater belief should stop the transmission of a rumour from a speaker to a hearer (Sunstein 2009, p. 53-4).

rumour-mongering can result in the acquisition, by the hearer, of a belief in a rumour, even when the speaker regards it as implausible.

Now, it is true that many rumour-mongers have an interest in whether the rumours they are spreading are plausible. I might, for example, want to believe Cindy and Alice are engaging in an office affair because that belief pleases me, or because Cindy rejected my advances and thus Alice, who I hate and detest, is the kind of person I now think Cindy deserves (because I am ill-disposed towards her). However, the act of rumour-mongering can bring with it the act of embellishing upon a rumour, and I think that this could be the pathology of the transmission process that CAJ Coady is concerned about. Consider these two related worries about rumour-mongers and rumour-mongering.

The first worry is that rumour-mongers, because they are not sincere in their utterances, might get mistaken for being rumourers. The hearer might believe that the proposition they have just heard is one the speaker believed. If influential organisations engage in rumour-mongering, especially in situations where there is no official (and warranted) information available, then this is a serious problem as it could lead to the dissemination of disinformation.

The second worry about rumour-mongering is that hearers will not necessarily know if the rumour they find to be plausible has been embellished, been tailored to be plausible to the hearer or so forth. If we assume (for the sake of argument) that most people express rumours without embellishments, et cetera, then the fact that some people might not just embellish but even wholly fabricate the rumours they spread, can lead to what is otherwise a generally reliable transmission process being perverted. Indeed, some charges of disinformation focus on how “those who are in power” spread tailored or fabricated rumours, which appear plausible, to the general populace in order to make certain conspiracy theories appear unwarranted.

This may explain part of the story as to why conspiracy theories and rumours are often confused; some of the evidence used to make the explanatory hypothesis of either an official theory or a conspiracy theory may be the result of rumour-mongering. Arguably, a lot of the evidence cited by 9/11 Truthers consists of rumours which have been mongered, just as a lot of the evidence that was said to warrant the official theory that there were weapons of mass destruction being developed by the Hussein regime in Iraq was mongered as well.

Now, presumably embellished or totally fabricated rumours should not spread far because of the checks and balances of the community of

speakers and hearers, but mongered rumours might persist in some cases.

For example, although Herriman does not explicitly argue for this thesis, in his article “The Great Rumor Mill: Gossip, Mass Media, and the Ninja Fear” he suggests that some rumour-mongered beliefs will survive in a community. Herriman is concerned that such mongered rumours, when they are part of an official theory or are put forward by what are taken to be, by hearers, influential institutions, like newspapers, might be considered plausible because they fit in with what the hearers in that community are meant to believe<sup>15 16</sup>.

Rumour-mongering, I think, shows that the normally reliable transmission process of rumours can be perverted. Now, the extent of this problem is really more a topic for sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists and the like, who are better placed to tell us just how often people embellish or even fabricate rumours. Still, both the embellishment of rumours and the possibility that a speaker might spread rumours for the sake of spreading rumours are, I think, problems for my account of the generally reliable nature of the transmission of rumours.

Let us return to Ewan and his rumour.

Ewan has heard that Cindy and Alice spent an inordinate amount of time in Cindy’s bedroom at a party five months ago. He then remembers that at an office party some five months ago he saw them in what can only be called a “compromising position” and infers that it is this particular party people have been talking about. He then starts a new rumour; he has heard that Cindy and Alice were already in a relationship five months ago. This is a kind of embellishment because Ewan is now adding content to the rumour. This move seems relatively unproblematic because Ewan’s embellishment is simply a plausible addition as it is something that is consistent with the original rumour

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<sup>15</sup> Herriman, N. (2010). The great rumor mill: Gossip, mass media, and the ninja fear. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 69(3), p. 739.

<sup>16</sup> Sunstein’s full model of rumour transmission, as expressed in ‘On Rumours,’ is an example of what he calls a “social cascade.” He has it that hearers will ignore defeater beliefs with regard to a certain rumour if most of their peers find the rumour plausible (Sunstein 2009, p. 22). Sunstein’s argument seems to be that there are social as well as epistemic reasons which bear on the plausibility of rumours to hearers and that the pressure to conform to the beliefs of your peers will often trump epistemic reasons to consider a given rumour as implausible.

and may even confirm it. Ewan is not lying, although maybe he should, in this case, sign-post his addition to the rumour.

Now, if David Coady is right, then this embellishment of the rumour will end up being checked by those who hear it. If Amanda says “No, that can’t be right; Alice and Jo started dating at that party,” then Ewan’s embellished rumour should not spread any further. If, however, Amanda goes “Hold on, now I think about it, I remember Cindy and Alice sharing a taxi after the party,” then Ewan’s embellished rumour may well end up spreading further because it coheres all the more with Amanda’s beliefs about Cindy and Alice and now seems all the more plausible. This again suggests that plausibility is a key feature of rumours: an implausible rumour, one that does not cohere with the hearers’ beliefs, is unlikely to spread far<sup>17</sup>.

The transmission of plausible propositions by trustworthy speakers, which seems to be what we have in the case of rumouring, should show us that the transmission of rumours is, by and large, reliable, and thus we have a case for treating rumours as *prima facie* warranted beliefs. The fact that we have to put up with some (perhaps even a lot of) elaboration and embellishment of rumours by rumour-mongers, just as we put up with the embellishments of historians, both written and oral, in our histories is the price we should be willing to pay for a generally reliable process.

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<sup>17</sup>The social media service that is Twitter (a micro-blogging platform) is a good example of how such a process works. Given the short nature of tweets, many messages on Twitter are either a URL or a quote with a corresponding request for confirmation of the content of said quote. If the quote or the content of the URL is plausible, the message will be retweeted by another Twitter user and if the content of the quote or the URL is not plausible it will either not be retweeted or the respondent will reply to the tweet with either a correction or a denial. Indeed, the rumour that President Obama was to announce the assassination of Osama bin Laden started spreading on Twitter almost an hour before the White House Press Conference on the 30th of April, 2011CE, and the rumour, which became remarkably detailed in the minutes before the official announcement, was accurate; the rumour was plausible because it cohered with other information people had heard and no defeaters were presented during its spread. (Stelter 2011)

## 6 Rumours and conspiracy theories

The claim that conspiracy theories can be rumours is an interesting and recurring issue in the literature. Cass Sunstein, in his recent book on rumours, for example, is of the opinion that conspiracy theories are spread by rumouring<sup>18</sup> but I think it is important to distinguish carefully between conspiracy theories and rumours, so that even if someone does not accept my argument about the reliability of rumours, they can still accept my argument that the transmission process associated with conspiracy theories is importantly different to that of rumours.

In 'Rumour Has It,' David Coady draws an analogy between the lack of officialness of rumours and a similar lack of officialness with respect to conspiracy theories as a reason for finding rumours and conspiracy theories suspicious. He argues that if a rumour is confirmed by some appropriate official source, then it will lose the status of being a rumour and that, in the same way, if a conspiracy theory is confirmed by some appropriate official source, then it loses the status of being a conspiracy theory.

His thesis on the unofficial nature of rumours is as follows:

[R]umours are essentially unofficial things. No public statement by a government or a government agency, for example, no matter how far removed it was from an original eyewitness account, could be a rumour (though, of course, it could confirm a pre-existing rumour or be responsible for starting another rumour).<sup>19</sup>

This is a thesis which applies to conspiracy theories, as well.

No official account of an event, no matter how conspiratorial it is, is likely to be characterised as a conspiracy theory. Both rumours and conspiracy theories seem by definition to lack official status.<sup>20</sup>

Now, I agree that one of the reasons why we are often thought to be justified in our suspicion of conspiracy theories is because they lack a certain authority, to wit, official status. In the same respect one of the

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<sup>18</sup>Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *On Rumours*. New York. Farrar, Strauss and Girous, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Coady, D. 2006. Rumour Has It. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1), p. 48.

<sup>20</sup>Coady, D. 2006. Rumour Has It. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1), p. 48.

reasons why we might find rumours suspicious is that they, too, lack authority.

Here is an example.

Amelia and Steffi are talking in the cafeteria. Both are concerned about the reasons behind the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America. Amelia is a conspiracy theorist with respect to this issue. She firmly believes that the official theory about the invasion, that the American Government claimed that the Saddam Hussein-led regime in Iraq was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction, was not just a lie but that the real reason for the invasion of Iraq was that America secretly wanted to take control of the region's oil reserves. Amelia is asserting a conspiratorial explanation for the invasion of Iraq by American forces and is, thus, asserting a conspiracy theory.

Steffi, on the other hand, believes that the Government of the United States of America did mistakenly believe that the Iraqi Government was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (and thus she denies one of the conspiracy theories of the event). She has also heard that a motivating factor for the invasion was that in addition to bringing down a Government which was developing WMDs it would also help America to take a controlling interest in the region's oil reserves, a proposition which she expresses to Amelia. Steffi is spreading a rumour.

Amelia believes that her conspiracy theory is the actual explanation for America's invasion of Iraq; she is asserting that it is the case. Steffi, however, is simply spreading a rumour. She is not asserting that her story is true but rather passing on something she has heard and found plausible. Should someone confirm Steffi's rumour with reference to some appropriately official source (say, leaked war documents), then not only would that make Steffi's rumour all the more plausible, it might, in fact, stop any of her further communication of this information from being a rumour because she could, now, testify that it is the case.

I think it is reasonable to say that rumours lack any form of official status. If a rumour had been endorsed by an appropriate authority, then it would not be a rumour<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>David Coady's argument about rumours and official status is sound, provided that we appeal to an appropriate authority; if a rumour is endorsed by an epistemically suitable official source or influential institution, then the rumour will become a proposition which we are justified in believing. However, if the rumour is endorsed by an inappropriate authority, i.e. someone who lacks the right kind of

However, part of the the so-called “common sense suspicion” about the *prima facie* unwarranted nature of conspiracy theories is precisely that they lack a certain authority, to wit, they have no official status.

Now, it is true that our suspicion of conspiracy theories is often based upon comparing them to their rivals, which are sometimes going to be official theories. In a case where we have an official theory, where we have a theory which has been endorsed, we might be tempted to consider the official theory to be the better explanation because the endorsement inherent in its official status implies that there is an appeal to authority that underpins the rival to the conspiracy theory. If this is the argument, then the lack of official status is a factor in the common sense suspicion of conspiracy theories but this common sense suspicion is wrong: unless we know that the appeal to authority is legitimate, then a theory having official status tells us nothing about whether belief in it is warranted or unwarranted<sup>22</sup>.

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credentials with respect to the content of the rumour, then it is not clear what that does to the status of the rumour.

This is a point I think Nicholas Herriman makes in his article ‘The Great Rumor Mill: Gossip, Mass Media, and the Ninja Fear,’ which is that a rumour can be treated as having been officially endorsed, and thus plausible, when influential media institutions report it as fact.

Nils Bubandt (2008) demonstrates that in North Maluku in 1999–2000, leaflets that contained oral rumors circulated. The information–conspiracy theories about Christian or Muslim “enemies”–was already hearsay, but gained authority through being written in the leaflets, and was a trigger for communal violence. (Herriman 2010, p. 726)

This kind of endorsement, I think, amounts to endorsing rumour-mongering, as the rumour has not been assessed to see whether it is plausible but rather it is treated as being newsworthy and is transmitted on to hearers via a medium which (perhaps mistakenly) many hearers think is trustworthy. David Coady makes a similar point: in the right kind of society rumours might be considered more reliable than official information (Coady 2006b, p. 48-9).

<sup>22</sup>Indeed, if this is a problem for conspiracy theories, then it is equally a problem for official theories, because, arguably, we need to be able to assess how much trust to place in the sources of official theories before we can say that they trump their rivals.

Neil Levy, in his 2007 paper, ‘Radically Socialized Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories,’ (Levy, 2007) takes it that official theories are



Yet, in the same way that the availability of an official theory could be said to provide a reason to doubt a conspiracy theory, a conspiracy theory could provide a good reason to doubt some official theory. Certainly, within certain communities conspiracy theories spread rapidly and widely and I would hazard that this is because the content of the conspiracy theory coheres well with the pre-existing beliefs of that group. This suggests that we can be easily fooled into accepting some proposition because of its plausibility, or coherence with our other beliefs.

I think we can say that one of the reasons why conspiracy theories seem to spread regardless of their low *relative* plausibility (in comparison to rival explanations) is that if the conspiracy theory coheres with some hearer's existing beliefs they might be less likely to appraise the trustworthiness of the speaker. Nevertheless, this is not a problem with conspiracy theories *per se* but rather with the psychology of certain conspiracy theorists.

We need to be able to appraise the trustworthiness of official sources before we can claim that official theories can trump conspiracy theories. This is precisely what some people, often labelled "conspiracy theorists" pejoratively, are concerned with when they downplay the institutional endorsement of official theories, I think, there is a perverse plausibility to this move. If you think "they" are out to get you, then you should expect that they will endorse false theories expecting the public to treat such an endorsement as a reason to think the theory has the right credentials.

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truth-conducive because they are transmitted between individuals and if the official theory considered plausible, then it must have been produced and preserved in an epistemically appropriate way (Levy 2007, p. 182). Levy's argument is that if official theories survive in what we might call the "marketplace of ideas" (a term Cass Sunstein, the Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, has used in his book, "On Rumours," a work which links rumours to conspiracy theories (Sunstein 2009)), it is because they are not just endorsed by official sources but also transmitted in a trusting fashion between speakers and hearers.

The problem with official theories is that whilst they might well spread from speakers to hearers such official sources are not necessarily going to be epistemically authoritative and may be an influential institution which is *merely* political in nature. In cases like this, we need to ask questions about whether we have a case for trusting the utterances of said institution.

Whilst rumours, like conspiracy theories, lack official status this is not because rumours are denied by, or are in opposition to, some influential institution or authority but simply because rumouring is a case of finding out what is the most plausible thing to believe (often without asking the authorities directly)

Recall the example of Amelia and Steffi and the real reason behind the invasion of Iraq. Amelia asserted a conspiracy theory to explain the invasion whilst Steffi expressed a rumour about why the invasion occurred. Conspiracy theorists regard the theories they assert as the most plausible explanation of the event; if there is a rival explanation to the conspiracy theories, then we need to assess both said rival (say, an official theory) and what this means for belief in the conspiracy theories.

This difference is crucial to understanding why we should not conflate the spreading of rumours with the spreading of conspiracy theories; rumours are *merely mentioned* and conspiracy theories are **proposed** as *the* explanation. What makes the transmission process of rumouring a reliable one is that when a speaker transmits a rumour to a hearer we do not require the speaker or the hearer to believe the rumour is true, we only require that the hearer finds it plausible, which is to say it coheres with her other beliefs. Thus, when a speaker engages in rumouring and transmits a rumour to a hearer, the speaker should be prepared for the possibility that the rumour will be considered implausible by the hearer; a defeater belief might be asserted which shows that the rumour is implausible. This should not be a problem for rumourers or the process of rumouring as it is a process of fact-finding or fact-checking. A rumourer should not stand by their proposition *if it is defeated or becomes implausible to them*. Defeater propositions, which show that the rumour is implausible, will be something, presumably, the rumourer should want to know. Indeed, the existence of a rival hypothesis with respect to a rumour may even be considered a good thing if it helps the rumourer to find out what is really going on.

Conspiracy theorists, however, will normally assert their conspiracy theories: the conspiracy theory presented by the conspiracy theorist is what they consider to be the best explanation of the event<sup>23 24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup>As a purely psychological point, some conspiracy theorists are unlikely to be easily dissuaded that their explanation is incorrect just because some hearer finds it implausible, especially if the conspiracy theorist has questions about whether the defeater propositions presented by said hearer in response to a conspiracy theory based in

Whereas the reliability of the transmission process of rumours is based on the plausibility of the rumoured proposition to the hearer (and trusting that speakers will not embellish or fabricate rumours) the transmission of conspiracy theories is reliable only when the speaker and the hearer are in a trusting relationship with one another such that the hearer inherits the asserted belief of the speaker.

Now, most people will say that this makes the transmission of conspiracy theories seem like it is a reliable process and thus prone to producing justified beliefs. However, our common sense suspicion about conspiracy theories has it that they are examples of unwarranted beliefs, so surely there must be something wrong with my analysis because it goes against a view most of us regard as very plausible.

My response is that a transmission process is only as good as its inputs. If a speaker has a justified belief that a conspiracy existed and they pass that on successfully, then the hearer will also form a justified

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what the conspiracy theorist considers to be disinformation or an appeal to an official theory.

<sup>24</sup>There is an obvious objection to my thesis that the spreading of rumours and conspiracy theories is importantly dissimilar, which goes like this:

Theorising about conspiracies is surely also a form of fact-finding, just like rumouring. It is an activity undertaken by an agent who wants to find the best explanation for an event.

I agree; theorising about conspiracies can be a kind of fact-finding but it is a different kind of activity to that of the spreading of conspiracy theories. The relationship between conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising is not analogous to the relationship between rumours and rumouring. Rumouring is a kind of fact-finding, a fishing for information based upon agents testing propositions against what else they know, promoting plausible beliefs and rejecting implausible ones. Theorising about conspiracies might be similar (in that it is an activity where you seek to answer the question of whether some event could have occurred because of the existence of a conspiracy), but the spreading of conspiracy theories is not, typically, a fact-finding exercise because conspiracy theories are proposed as *the* explanation of an event. This is why the reliable transmission of conspiracy theories does not *merely* require that we trust speakers, but it also requires that the speaker have a justified belief that some conspiracy theory is *the* explanation of the event in question. This task is not impossible but it may well be difficult in many cases.

belief about said conspiracy. The question, then, is whether the speaker's belief in the existence of a conspiracy was itself warranted?

I think the answer to this question depends, in part, on whether conspiracy theories, as explanations, are formed in the right way. When it comes to assessing the transmission of a conspiracy theory for its reliability it is not sufficient to *merely* say that if a hearer trusts the speaker of some conspiracy theory, then the hearer is justified in taking onboard belief in said conspiracy theory because we might trust a conspiracy theorist to be sincere in their assertion but not trust that they have arrived at their belief in an orthodox manner. We need to look at the inference to the existence of a conspiracy, which underpins the conspiracy theory itself, and ask whether the conspiracy theorist who originally proposed the conspiracy theory inferred to the best explanation out of the range of plausible candidate hypotheses rather than just engaged in inferring to any old explanation.

We might be tempted to think that a conspiracy theory must do a lot of work to be considered warranted. Conspiracy theories must not only be transmitted in a trusting fashion but they must also be the best possible explanation (of a range of candidate explanations). The existence of competing explanatory hypotheses, as rivals to some conspiracy theory (or set of conspiracy theories), indicates that the conspiracy theory is controversial and thus must be backed up with an argument as to why the inference to the existence of a conspiracy, in this case, is the best explanation.

## **7 Conclusion**

I have compared and contrasted the transmission processes of rumours and conspiracy theories, which are sometimes considered to be unwarranted for the same reasons. I argued that we should not confuse the issue of the reliability of rumours with that of the reliability of conspiracy theories because they typically have different transmission processes.

Rumouring is, typically, a form of fact-finding or checking, where propositions we have heard stated are tested against the beliefs of others. I argued that, when it comes to appraising rumours, what is important is whether the hearer trusts the rumourer to be sincere and finds the content of the rumoured proposition plausible. If a rumour is implausible it is unlikely to spread far in the community of speakers and hearers because hearers, presumably, are interested in auditing the propositions which spread through their community. If a rumour is plausible to some hearer, then the hearer may well go and test the

rumour out on some other hearer to see whether it is coherent with their beliefs. It is this set of conditions about the testing, or teasing out, of the plausibility of rumours that leads me to think that rumouring is a reliable process.

The activity of rumour-mongering, the insincere and pathological counterpart of rumouring, explains why we might think of rumouring as an unreliable process. An agent who engages in rumour-mongering may well embellish or even fabricate the rumours they spread. Rumour-mongering is an abuse of trust because rumour-mongering is the insincere transmission of a rumour. Now, the process of auditing, the checks and balances of the transmission process of rumours will, I argue, mean that embellished and fabricated rumours will typically end up being implausible to hearers but, in some cases, such rumours may well persist in a community. This is a bullet we have to bite when it comes to the transmission of rumours: the reliability of the process means we cannot guarantee that all rumours will be plausible.

I also argued that the transmission process associated with conspiracy theories can be reliable but that there is an important difference between rumouring and the spreading of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are asserted, rather than *merely* mentioned, as *the* explanation of an event. The conspiracy theorist does not *merely* believe their conspiracy theory is plausible, they believe it to be *the* explanation. It is in this way that rumours and conspiracy theories are different.

Or, at least, that's what I've heard. Rumour has it that people who say otherwise are conspiracy theorists.

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