

Have You Heard? Rumours and Conspiracy Theories

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1 Introduction

We have all heard them. Rumours about government-sanctioned attacks on its own people. Hidden military bases in Nevada. Conspiracy Theories concerning terrorist training camps in the Ureweras. Drawing on recent work by CAJ Coady and David Coady I will develop a theory which exploits the distinction between Rumours and Rumour-mongering. Whilst Rumour-mongering seems to present a pathology of Testimony Rumours themselves can be examples of warranted beliefs. Yet even if Rumours can count as being reliable, it seems that Conspiracy Theories, which share many of the same characteristics with Rumours, should be regarded as unreliable. I will argue that this is because Conspiracy Theories, unlike Rumours, typically exist in contrast to Official Theories. As Official Theories are more reliable than Conspiracy Theories we are often justified in our suspicion of Conspiracy Theories but the same consideration does not apply to Rumours, leaving their reliability alone.

2 Rumours as Pathological Testimony

Recent work in Epistemology has paid very little attention to Rumour with the exception of two articles, one by CAJ Coady and the other by David Coady. CAJ Coadys paper, 'Pathologies of Testimony' (Coady 2006a), argues that Rumours are representative of a distortion of the normal way of telling and relying on what is being told, a misfire-cum-pathology of the testimony-transmission process.

The testimony-transmission process, the transfer of a proposition from speaker to hearer is achieved, in part, by a speakers assertion; when someone testifies they assert 'that p' and, if the process is reliable then the hearer will acquire the belief 'that p.' When a speaker testifies they assert a proposition ('that p'), which we can call a 'piece of Testimony.'

I am going to define a reliable testimony-transmission process as being the transmission of a plausible proposition between trusting speakers and hearers, which is along the lines of the work of such philosophers as CAJ Coady (Coady 1992, ch. 9) (Coady 2006a) and Alvin Goldman (Goldman 1999, ch. 4). Because I am concerned with what it is rational for a hearer to believe I will focus not on whether the proposition is true but whether it is plausible. A proposition, then, will be plausible when it coheres with the hearers other beliefs. Plausibility is not enough for the reliability of the testimony-transmission process, however; a proposition can be plausible to a hearer but if the speaker is not trustworthy, then the hearer would not be justified in accepting it, at least, not on the basis of this transmission chain. This allows that a speaker who is not convinced of the plausibility of their proposition could, if trusted, testify 'that p' to a hearer and

said hearer could, if they judged the speaker to be trustworthy, acquire the belief ‘that p.’ This is not an unacceptable consequence, however, providing that the hearer trusts that the speaker’s source or chain of sources for the proposition were trustworthy and convinced of the proposition’s plausibility. As long as the unconvinced speaker trusted the speaker she heard it from (or the person prior, et cetera) to have found the proposition plausible then the chain of transmission is reliable and will produce warranted beliefs.

Rumours, however, unlike pieces of Testimony, are usually propositions expressed by speakers who have no commitment to the plausibility of the proposition (they may merely think it is interesting); speakers who express Rumours are not asserting ‘that p;’ they need not be convinced that the proposition is plausible nor do they need to be a trustworthy source. The speaker of a Rumour does not even need to have trusted the person she got it from and whoever they tell it to do not need to trust them. Rumours, then, are not like Testimony.

Time for an example. Amanda and Ewan are discussing office politics; Amanda knows that Cindy, their boss, is secretly going out with Morris, who was recently let go and she is trying to work out when they started dating. Amanda knows firsthand that Cindy and Morris are an item and is passing this on to Ewan; she is testifying. Now Ewan knows a Rumour about Cindy and Morris; he tells Amanda that he has heard that Morris and Cindy got together at an office party five months ago. Ewan is spreading a Rumour.

CAJ Coady argues that Rumours present a pathology of the

testimony-transmission process because Rumours lack authority; a hearer cannot take the speaker to be an appropriate source for the proposition they have expressed. This is because a Rumour need not be plausible and its transmission from speaker to hearer need not be based on trust; thus the testimony-transmission process of transferring propositions is perverted. He runs his critique by contrasting Rumours with Gossip. He argues that Gossip is an example of a reliable testimony-transmission process; Gossip is usually firsthand and presented as being plausible. Should you trust the speaker you will acquire the belief ‘that p.’

Ewan, then, is not an appropriate authority for the Rumour because he is not committed to or convinced that the proposition being plausible. Indeed, not only may he not necessarily believe it but he might even embellish upon it, possibly to make a better story, add in some salient detail or simply because he can. For CAJ Coady the possibility of embellishment makes it all the less likely that Rumours can be reliable.

“Rumour-mongers, by contrast [to gossipers], may well deliberately create false rumours. Moreover, rumours may well begin in sheer speculation, though they will usually mimic testimonial transmission by conveying the idea that someone somewhere is a witnessing source.”
(Coady 2006a, p. 263)

One way to see this is with the locution. Gossip is usually introduced as ‘Did you know?’ (or some synonymous locution). The speaker expresses their belief ‘that p;’ they assert it to be the case. Gossip, then, is a form of Testimony;

when you gossip you are testifying ‘that p.’ If you believe that the testimony-transmission process is reliable, then Gossip, as a form of Testimony, is a reliable source of justified beliefs. Rumours, however, according to CAJ Coady, are not reliable. He argues that this is evident in the locution. Rumours, he argues, are introduced with Have you heard? (Coady 2006a, p. 262)¹

Now, I think that this mischaracterises Rumours. You could be forgiven for thinking that if a speaker prefaces their proposition with something like ‘Have you heard?’ the speaker is expressing something they find to be plausible. The locution ‘Have you heard?’ signals an assertion. The locution ‘Rumour has it’, however, asserts nothing more than the claim that the proposition is being bandied about. ‘Rumour has it’ carries with it no implication of the proposition being plausible; it merely suggests that the speaker has heard it that this might be the case. Of course, Rumours are not always marked as such and some Rumours will be confused with as being assertions the proposition is plausible rather than it has been rumoured; when this occurs we have a clear case of Rumour presenting a pathology of Testimony.

CAJ Coadys thesis, then, in ‘Pathologies of Testimony’ is that Rumours represent a misfire of the testimony-transmission process. Rumours are not asserted, their transmission is not based upon trust and thus Rumours are unreliable. This makes Rumour a pathology of Testimony.

2.1 Rumours as Not Unreliable

David Coady, in ‘Rumour Has It,’ Coady (2006c) takes the view that Rumours are not unreliable. Because they exist in a community of speakers and hearers, all of whom can check and analyse the Rumours they hear the kind of worry CAJ Coady espouses, that they will be embellished and possibly even totally fabricated, will be ameliorated by the checks and balances of the testimony-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.”
(Coady 2006c, p. 47)

By ‘the reliability of those who spread a rumour’ I take it that he is referring to the process of transmission; a reliable speaker is one who not only utters plausible propositions but is considered trustworthy by those who hear her. If this is the transmission process of Rumours then it looks like very similar to the Testimony-transmission process. This is not to say that Rumours are a form of Testimony, however. They may share the same kind of transmission process but this does not mean that the propositions being transmitted have similar properties. Whereas Testimony is asserted, Rumours are not. Rumours are merely suggested. What David Coady is arguing here is that if a Rumour

survives the checks and balances of its transmission process (because some people will be interesting in confirming or denying them), then this is a *prima facie* reason to find the Rumour true (or, in my reading, plausible).

You could argue here that David Coadys argument makes a much stronger claim than mine; he is arguing that we have a *prima facie* case for saying that Rumours are true whilst I merely say they are plausible. David Coady, I think, takes the reliability of the transmission process, in the long term, as granting truth to the Rumour. We are warranted in thinking that a Rumour is true if it survives and persists in a community of speakers and hearers.

“[T]he distance of rumours from an original eyewitness account is not a general reason for scepticism about them. On the contrary, such distance may make belief in rumours more warranted.” (Coady 2006c, p. 48)

David Coady moves from the consideration of a Rumour being plausible to it becoming true by virtue of the transmission process. I wish to operate with the weaker notion of plausibility, seeing that I am concerned with what it is reasonable, or rational, for a hearer to believe. Still, I might be persuaded to say that the transmission process makes Rumours ‘more plausible’ (whatever that means). Indeed, the plausibility of a Rumour can be considered with reference not just to an individual agent (the speaker or the hearer) but also to groups of agents (the community of speakers and hearers). 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, and its source is considered trustworthy.

If we take our community of agents to consist of mostly trustworthy speakers or trusting hearers, then it is the plausibility of a given Rumour that we should be concerned with. When a Rumour is first expressed the plausibility of it is solely the concern of the hearer, but as the Rumour spreads the plausibility of it to the community of speakers and hearers will take on more importance. A single hearer might well find that the proposition coheres with their beliefs, but that hearer might be anomalous. They may not be ‘normal’ in the beliefs that they hold. As the Rumour spreads, 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. In this way we might be tempted to call such a belief that survives such scrutiny ‘true.’

2.2 Rumours as Reliable

David Coady, in ‘Rumour Has It’ stops short of saying that Rumours are reliable. He, rather, argues that Rumours are not unreliable. His argument is directed CAJ Coadys claim that Rumours are an unreliable source of beliefs.

I wish to advance a stronger thesis. I believe that Rumours are reliable. The process associated with Rumours produces warranted beliefs. If you hear a Rumour you have a *prima facie* reason to treat it as warranted. This is not to say that Rumours are always warranted beliefs, because some Rumour-mongering represents a pathology of the transmission process, but that we have a case to think that such beliefs are usually warranted, all things being equal.

Rumour-mongering presents a challenge to my thesis but, I think, only if we claim that Rumours are asserted. As I argued earlier, Rumours are best understood as being expressed but not as being asserted. I think we are right to claim that people do not necessarily believe the Rumours they spread (but they might well think they are interesting, especially if they turned out to be plausible). I think we can say that the expressing of a Rumour has Assertion-like properties, in that we can have an interest in their possible plausibility (even if we do not hold them to be actually plausible) What seems assertive in the case of Rumours is that speaker can be said that the Rumour might be the case, but even this would be going too far if the Rumour was an embellishment or a fabrication (although this could be problematic; if I embellish a Rumour I may well still be asserting the Rumour but simply not being as honest in my assertion (for, presumably, I am not sign-posting the additions)). If Rumours are not asserted then the ‘truth,’ so to speak, of the Rumour is not as important as its plausibility. The trustworthiness of speakers, then, in respect to Rumours, is probably not to do with whether the speaker trusted their source (to be convinced of the plausibility of the proposition) but rather that the speaker can be trusted to pass on the Rumour without embellishing upon it.

The embellishment of Rumours seem to be the chief problem here. What can we say about Ewan in my example? Maybe he is making an inference. Ewan has heard that Cindy and Morris got together at an office party. He remembers that at the office party some five months ago he saw them in a ‘compromising position’ and infers that it is this particular office party people have been talking

about. This is a kind of embellishment; Ewan is adding to the Rumour but this move seems relatively unproblematic. Ewan's inference here is simply adding a plausible addition to the Rumour, something that seems to confirm it. Now, if David Coady is right then this embellishment will be checked. If Amanda says 'No, that can't be right; Morris and Jo hooked up that night' then Ewan's embellished Rumour will probably not spread. If Amanda goes 'Hold on, now I think about it I remember them sharing a taxi after the do' then it may well spread further, because now the embellished Rumour seems all the more plausible because it coheres all the more with Amanda's beliefs.

If Ewan is fishing for information, then he may not be propagating a Rumour at all. Should it be mistaken for a Rumour, well, that is just an unfortunate side-effect and it will still be checked with respect to the normal considerations of the transmission process; propositional plausibility and trusting transmission.

In this way Rumours do look reliable because they share the same kind of transmission process as that of Testimony. The persistence and survival of them looks remarkably similar to the spread and persistence of testimonial beliefs. I think that the warrant of a Rumour is predicated, long term, for the same reasons that we treat a piece of Testimony as being warranted; its spread and survival is due to a reliable transmission process.

2.3 Rumours vs. Rumour-mongering

The best way to explicate this issue of the reliability of Rumours is, I think, to distinguish between Rumours and Rumour-mongering. By drawing out this distinction between the speech act of Rumour-mongering and the proposition delivered by said act, the Rumour, I believe we can explain why CAJ Coady finds Rumours to be unreliable, David Coady finds them to be not unreliable and why I think they are reliable.

Rumour-mongering merely results in the transmission of Rumours. I say ‘merely’ because, unlike the transmission of Testimony, which, when all goes well, is the trustworthy transmission of plausible propositions between speakers and hearers, Rumour-mongering can, even if all goes well, be the transfer of propositions between a speaker and a hearer regardless of plausibility or trust.

Now, it is true that many Rumour-mongers have an interest in whether their particular Rumours are plausible (even if such an interest may turn out to be unrelated to them being justified beliefs; my interest in a given Rumour might well be because I really want it to be the case rather than it looking as if it is). Very often, however, Rumour-mongering brings embellishing along with it and this seems like it could be the pathology of the testimony-transmission process that CAJ Coady is so concerned with. This probably also explains why many people treat the term Rumour-mongering as being pejorative.

Whilst I think that Rumours are generally reliable I think that Rumour-mongering is suspicious. Rumour-mongering need not be taken pejoratively, but even if we assume that most people express Rumours without

embellishments the fact that people might do so can make such an act a pathological form of the kind of reliable transmission of propositions we normally associate with Testimony. This suggests that an important part of the assessing of the trustworthiness of speakers is not just their record of honesty, sincerity and the like, but how what they express coheres with the hearers existing beliefs.

Rumour-mongering shows that the reliability of the transmission process can be perverted if there are no checks and balances. Naive trust is not enough. Now, the extent of this problem of perverted proposition transmission is really a topic for sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists who are better placed to tell us just how often people do this. But Rumours themselves represent warranted beliefs because their persistence in a community of speakers and hearers is predicated on the same kind of process as that of reliable Testimony. To show this I want to take a leaf from David Coadys 'Rumour Has It' and compare and contrast Rumours to Conspiracy Theories, because the salient differences between these similar kinds of 'suspect' beliefs will show why Rumours turn out to be reliable and why Conspiracy Theories do not.

3 Rumours and Conspiracy Theories

A Conspiracy Theory is a putative explanation of some event that cites a Conspiracy Conspiracies happen. Typically, however, when one encounters a Conspiracy Theory, scepticism is in order because a lot of them are implausible.

In 'Rumour Has It' David Coady argues that there is an important similarity between Rumours and Conspiracy Theories; they both lack some kind

of official status. A Rumour which is confirmed by an official source will lose the status of being merely a Rumour. Similarly a theory with official status that cites conspiratorial activities is unlikely to be characterised as being a Conspiracy Theory.

CAJ Coady, in 'Pathologies of Testimony,' presented the argument that Rumours are not restricted by topic to the personal.

“A further difference is that rumour is not restricted by topic to the personal. It may be about institutional, political, religious, or physical events. You can spread a rumour about an earthquake but you cannot gossip about it.” (Coady 2006a, p. 263)

David Coady further develops CAJ Coadys thesis, focussing on the institutional aspect of Rumours. David Coady runs this line by distinguishing between official and unofficial stories.

“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. It might seem that we are now in a position to identify the real reason we should adopt a sceptical attitude to rumours. It is an appropriate attitude towards rumour for the same reason it is surely an appropriate attitude towards conspiracy theory.” (Coady 2006c, p. 48)

Now, one of the reasons why we are suspicious of Conspiracy Theories is precisely because they lack a certain authority, to wit, Official Status. In the

same respect one of the reasons why we might find Rumours suspicious is that they, too, lack Official Status. David Coady argues that this suspicion is misplaced and that a proper understanding of this suspicion of Conspiracy Theories will also shed light on why it is inappropriate to have a *prima facie* suspicion of Rumours. (Coady 2006c, p. 48-9)

I want to develop this thesis. I will argue that the intuition that belief in Conspiracy Theories is *prima facie* irrational is not as clear cut as some would have it, which should inform our related suspicion of Rumours but I also want to show that there is an important dissimilarity between Conspiracy Theories and Rumours, to wit that whilst Rumours merely lack official status Conspiracy Theories are typically in direct opposition to some Official Theory.

3.1 Public Trust Skepticism

Before we can claim that Official Theories trump Conspiracy Theories we need to be able to say that Official Theories represent a more trustworthy source of propositions than Conspiracy Theories do. This is in line with the work of Brian L. Keeley and of Lee Basham.

Keeley, in his article ‘Of Conspiracy Theories’ (Keeley 1999) argued that we should find belief in Conspiracy Theories suspect because such a belief entails a pervading scepticism of social data. Any information from an Official Source could be the product of conspirators, invisible masters. Not just this but even unofficial sources could be affected or even be disguised disinformation sources. The conspiracy theorist, then, should be a sceptic in regard to all social data

because any or all of it might be disinformation, put out there by the conspirators.

“Unlike the case of science, where nature is construed as a passive and uninterested party with respect to human-knowledge gathering activities, the conspiracy theorist is working in a domain where the investigated actively seeks to hamper the investigation.” (Keeley 1999, p. 120)

and:

“It is not ad hoc to suppose that false and misleading data will be thrown your way when one supposes that there is somebody out there actively throwing that data at you.” (Keeley 1999, p. 121)

Keeley calls this kind of scepticism ‘Public Trust Scepticism.’ However, Keeley argues that we can avoid the move to extreme scepticism because the mechanisms of open societies, like the one we live in, provide the necessary checks and balances. The Free Press, concerned individuals and the like help us generate some trust of social data, thus avoiding the kind of wholesale Public Trust Scepticism characterised by belief in Conspiracy Theories, giving us a case to be sceptical of Conspiracy Theories themselves (Keeley 1999, p. 121-2).

“It is this pervasive scepticism of people and public institutions entailed by some mature conspiracy theories which ultimately provides us with the grounds with which to identify them as unwarranted. It is not their lack of falsifiability per se, but the increasing amount of

skepticism required to maintain faith in a conspiracy theory as time passes and the conspiracy is not uncovered in a convincing fashion. As this skepticism grows to include more and more people and institutions, the less plausible any conspiracy becomes.” (Keeley 1999, p. 123)

3.2 The Open Society

Lee Basham, in his article ‘Malevolent Global Conspiracy’ (Basham 2003) argues that as we have good reason to believe that public institutions have conspired against us in the past that we should admit the possibility that such institutions could still be conspiring. Belief in Conspiracy Theories may well engender scepticism about our sources of social data but this is a trade-off we should be willing to make.

Basham is arguing that some degree of ‘Public Trust Skepticism’ is justified. He agrees with Keeley that our society is ‘open’ but questions whether we are ‘open’ enough (Basham 2003, p. 99). Because our society is still largely hierarchical it is possible for conspirators to be operating at the highest level of our public institutions, effectively controlling or altering social data before the Free Press and concerned individuals can analyse it. The actions of concerned individuals and the Free Press might well look as if they provide the necessary checks and balances against possible conspiracies but this may well be just an illusion foisted upon us by our ‘invisible masters.’

“With these points in mind we can accept that all things remaining equal, (1) the more open a societys institutions of power, the less

initially warranted overarching conspiracy theories are, and (2) given a particular level of openness, the greater the difficulty experienced in keeping a conspiracy theory alive (via ever-expanding claims of falsified evidence, media manipulation, etc.), the less warranted it is, because the conspiracy's execution would be that much more difficult. While today this may license little confidence it points us in precisely the right direction.” (Basham 2003, p. 99)

It is this point that I think David Coady is echoing; we need to be able to appraise the trustworthiness of official information in our society before we can claim that Official Theories trump Conspiracy Theories. Indeed, this very point was made by David Coady in the introduction to ‘Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate’ (Coady 2006b). Conspiracy theorising does seem to be more warranted in less open societies and even in supposedly open societies the degree of scepticism we should express towards Conspiracy Theories will depend on a variety of factors to do with freedom and our ability to access information about our society.

“Conspiracy theorizing seems to be more warranted in non-democratic societies than it is in democracies. But not all democracies are alike. The extent to which it is rational to be sceptical of conspiracy theories in a democracy depends on a variety of factors, including the effectiveness of freedom of information legislation, the diversity of media ownership, the independence of the public service from the government, and the independence of the branches of government from one another.” (Coady 2006b, p. 10)

3.3 Rumours and Conspiracy Theories

I agree with both Lee Basham and David Coady; it is not sufficient to claim, merely based upon the assumed openness of society, that a *prima facie* suspicion of Conspiracy Theories is warranted. Even so, we might still be justified in what Basham calls a ‘studied agnosticism’ (Basham 2001, p. 275) of Conspiracy Theories; we can be sceptical of them depending on how open we think our society is without descending into extreme scepticism. Whilst some social data might well be the embellishments or fabrications of our ‘invisible masters’ we can still generate general trust in social data and avoid extreme scepticism. We can admit to the very real possibility of conspiratorial behaviour without falling into wholesale Public Trust Skepticism.

But even if we have good reason to be sceptical about Conspiracy Theories, this does not automatically mean we should be sceptical towards Rumours for the same reasons. Many ‘popular’ Conspiracy Theories, such as the claim that the BATF orchestrated the Oklahoma City Bombing and that 9/11 was an inside job have opposing theories with official status, which are the widely accepted official explanations of the events. Conspiracy Theories are putative explanations. Our suspicion of them is often, rightly or wrongly, based upon comparing such explanations to those generally accepted explanations, those theories with official status. Because theories with official status usually seem much more plausible and their transmission is much more trustworthy (if you live in a relatively open society) such theories would appear to trump Conspiracy Theories. The lack of official status, then is a very real factor in scepticism for

Conspiracy Theories. Rumours also lack such official status but this is not because they are denied or are in opposition to some appropriate authority or ‘Official Theory’ but simply because they are not confirmed by such sources.

This points towards an important dissimilarity between Rumours and Conspiracy Theories. Conspiracy Theories, in general, lack official status because they often have what is usually considered to be more plausible rivals. Typically, Rumours are unofficial because they are merely unconfirmed. They can even exist in parallel with theories with official status and add further details to them as long as they do not contradict them.

3.4 Why Rumours are Reliable and Conspiracy Theories are not

Amelia and Steffi are talking in the cafeteria. Both of them are concerned about the reasons behind the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America. Amelia is a conspiracy theorist. She firmly believes that the Official Story about the invasion, that the American Government claimed that the Saddam Hussein-led regime in Iraq was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction, is not just a lie but that the real reason was that America wanted to control the regions petroleum supply. Steffi, on the other hand, is a Rumour-monger. She believes that the Government of the United States of America did mistakenly believe that the Iraqi Government was developing Weapons of Mass Destruction but she also has heard that another motivating factor was that in bringing down a Government developing WMDs it would give America a controlling interest in the regions oil reserves.

Amelia believes that her Conspiracy Theory is the actual explanation for Americas invasion of Iraq; she asserts that this is the case but her explanation has been denied by some appropriate authority. Steffi, however, is simply spreading a Rumour. She is not asserting that her story is the case, although we might claim that she is suggesting that the theory with official status is incomplete (but even so only that she has heard this, not that she necessarily believes it).

I think this shows an important difference between Rumour-mongering and Conspiracy Theorising. In Rumour-mongering we do not assert a Rumour (although you might still have an interest in the plausibility of the proposition you are uttering); it does not require the speaker to find the Rumour plausible. Conspiracy Theorising, however, is the assertion of a Conspiracy Theory. Conspiracy Theorists are expressing their belief ‘that p’ is plausible.

I think it is reasonable to claim that Conspiracy Theorists assert their Conspiracy Theories because Conspiracy Theorists believe that their Conspiracy Theories are the more plausible explanations. But Rumour-mongering, however, is not the asserting of a Rumour (although, arguably, it can have assertive-like properties) in that we do not hold Rumour-mongers to believe their Rumours are plausible (although they might have an interest in trying to confirm them). It is, of course, possible to mention Conspiracy Theories without asserting them. I can describe Conspiracy Theories galore but I think most of them to be implausible and they are just interesting stories I like to tell; they are, effectively, Rumours.

So, with this in mind, what does this say about the warrant of Rumours in

contrast to Conspiracy Theories? I think that Conspiracy Theories are typically unwarranted whilst Rumours typically are. This is because Rumours are not asserted whilst Conspiracy Theories are.

A Conspiracy Theory must do a lot more ‘work’ than its rival Official Theory for it to be considered ‘good.’ Conspiracy Theories must not only be transmitted in a trusting fashion but they must also be plausible, and the presence of Official Theories means this plausibility is lacking. This is not to say that Conspiracy Theories are always implausible, just that we are justified in treating them as such. That some people do not share this suspicion-cum-scepticism is, to take a leaf out of David Coadys ‘Rumour Has It,’ symptomatic of some other factor that makes the Conspiracy Theory more plausible.

“[B]elief in rumours will be less warranted when selection pressures other than judgements of plausibility are significantly affecting their development. A rumour may survive and spread even though it is highly implausible because it satisfies some deeply felt psychological or social need.” (Coady 2006c, p. 50)

I suspect that this suggests that it is plausibility rather than transmission which is important in the acceptability of certain kinds of propositions. In a trusting environment, ala an open society, the chain of transmission from official sources should make their propositions plausible. This affects Conspiracy Theories but not Rumours. Conspiracy Theories are usually asserted, Rumours are not. For Conspiracy Theories to be examples of warranted beliefs they must

somehow trump both the plausibility of Official Theories and their trustworthy transmission.

In the case of Rumours the trustworthy distribution of plausible propositions works in favour of Rumours being generally reliable precisely because Rumours lack official status because they are merely unconfirmed propositions. The existence of Official Theories that can contradict Conspiracy Theories, however, makes a case for such propositions to be considered unreliable; Conspiracy Theories need to be all the more plausible as propositions to escape the fact that their transmission is not considered as trustworthy as those of Official Theories. I think that one of the reasons why Conspiracy Theories seem to spread regardless of their plausibility (in comparison to rival explanations) is that if the Conspiracy Theory coheres with your existing beliefs you are less likely to appraise the trustworthiness of the speaker.

Perhaps what this really suggests is that we are easily fooled into believing some proposition because of its plausibility, or coherence with our beliefs and that this can trump our considerations of just how trustworthy the source is. Certainly, within certain communities Conspiracy Theories spread rapidly and widely and I would hazard that this is because the proposition coheres so well with the pre-existing beliefs of that group that the Conspiracy Theories plausibility is weighted more favourably than that of the chain of transmission. Rumours also spread wildly, although they probably do not spread so much because they cohere with a hearer's beliefs but rather because they are interesting and they do not conflict with whatever the hearer knows.

3.5 The Reliable Rumour

What I have said might suggest that Rumours are more reliable than Conspiracy Theories but that we would not be warranted in taking them to be justified beliefs. I do not believe this to be the case. Rumours are a reliable source of justified beliefs. They exist in a community of speakers and hearers. The more hearers the Rumour encounters the more likely it is to stop spreading if it turns out to be implausible. I do not think that Rumour-mongering is asserting but I do agree with David Coady that the more plausible a Rumour the more likely it is to spread.

Indeed, the argument in favour of Rumours being reliable is strikingly like the story we now tell about the veridical nature of Oral Histories. Oral Histories are those accounts of the past that have been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, such as the early stories of the Trojan War, the arrival of the Maori in Aotearoa and so forth. I think it is safe to claim that we once thought of Oral Histories as being inferior to Written Histories but work in Anthropology and Archaeology in the Twentieth Century has shown that Oral Histories preserve the ‘truth’ of the past as well as their counterpart written accounts. Oral Histories, it turns out, are equally good as their written counterparts. When tested against the archaeological record Oral Histories perform as well as Written Histories. That Oral Histories have spread and persisted in their communities indicates that they have survived checks and balances, much in the way that reliable Testimony does.

The transmission of plausible propositions by trustworthy speakers, which

seems to be the case in both Rumours and in Oral Histories, should show us that Rumours are, by and large, reliable. The fact that we have to put up with some elaboration and embellishment of Rumours by Rumour-mongers, just as we put up with the embellishments of historians, both written and oral, is the price we pay for a generally reliable process. Reliability, in cases like these, does not guarantee us that the justified belief we have inherited is plausible. Rather, it simply gives us the warrant to take it as being plausible.

As for Conspiracy Theories, I think that the lesson we learn from these is that plausibility is really the motivating factor for a hearer taking onboard a speakers proposition. As long as the Conspiracy Theory coheres with your existing beliefs then considerations such as whether the speaker is trustworthy, honest and so forth are of less importance. This is not to say that such considerations are thrown out the window but rather that they are not weighted equally with the plausibility of the proposition.

Or, at least, that's the Rumour. People who say otherwise are damned Conspiracy Theorists.

Notes

¹Can Gossip be Rumour and Rumour Gossip? I think not. I think that while we can quite easily mistake one for the other the distinction I have drawn out, that Gossip is asserted and Rumour is not, marks them out as quite separate kinds of propositions. 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 Rumour-mongering. 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 get on my nerves.

Both the Coadys draw out a distinction between Gossip and Rumour that draws upon the notion that Gossip is (usually) firsthand (Coady 2006a, p. 254-5) (Coady 2006c, p. 42). I somewhat agree with that Gossip is firsthand; certainly one way to show that Gossip is asserted is show that the Gossiper believes their piece of Gossip to be the case, and in this respect the chain of Gossip is like that of the chain of Testimony; as long as we have some source who has a warranted belief 'that p' and every hearer trusts the speaker who passes it on, then the warrant of

the piece of Gossip is, in some way, firsthand (in that we could, if need be, seek out and assess the source of the proposition). However this does not mean that a piece of Gossip must be immediately firsthand. If I trust the speaker to have received the piece of Gossip they are telling me in an appropriate (ala reliable) way, then the Gossip is warranted regardless of whether I know 'that p' firsthand. I think this reflects the way we talk about Gossip and the way we Gossip. In the same way this supports the notion that Rumour is not the same as Gossip; I do not need to trust that the speaker formed their Rumour in a way appropriate to Gossip/Testimony. This also supports the notion that we can be easily confused as to whether what we have just heard is Rumour or Gossip; the processes by which I, as a hearer, assess Gossip or Rumour are different and thus if the locution is ambiguous or I misunderstand the speakers intent I could treat Rumour as Gossip or vice-versa.

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