

BELIEF IN RUMORS HARD TO DISPEL

Fact checking easily undermined by images, unrelated facts

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<http://www.comm.ohio-state.edu/kgarrett/FactcheckMosqueRumors.pdf>

For other results from this study, see:

<http://www.comm.ohio-state.edu/kgarrett/MediaMosqueRumors.pdf>

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OVERVIEW

Today, more than 70 million Americans think that President Obama was born in a foreign country, despite extensive evidence to the contrary.¹ This is a troubling statistic, suggesting that many citizens are unable or unwilling adjust their beliefs in response to objective information. In this study, we sought to identify conditions that lead people to disregard or reject factual evidence when formulating their beliefs.

Recent research suggests that a variety of factors can contribute to this behavior. We know, for example, that people are more inclined to believe political smears about candidates they perceive to be socially different. And in some cases, efforts to correct misinformation can actually backfire, leading people to embrace their inaccurate beliefs. Our question was whether information included in a rebuttal, but unrelated to the rumor, could also play a role. Specifically, we wanted to know whether images or unrelated opinions might shape people's reaction to a factual rebuttal.

The controversy over the proposed construction of a cultural center and mosque in New York City just a few blocks from Ground Zero provides the backdrop for this study. We presented participants in the study with one of several different versions of a rebuttal to a rumor about the Imam backing the project. We find that including information unrelated to the rumor in the rebuttal powerfully influences people's decision to accept or reject the factual information.

¹ According to a CNN survey conducted in August 2010, between 24% and 30% of the population say that Obama was probably or definitely born in another country. (See <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/08/04/cnn-poll-quarter-doubt-president-was-born-in-u-s/>)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We conducted a national online survey (N=750) between September 14th and September 19th to examine how a variety of factors influenced Americans' exposure to and belief in four false rumors about the proposed construction of an Islamic community center and mosque in New York City two blocks from ground zero. In addition to these measures, the survey also included detailed factual information refuting one of the rumors presented. There were four different versions of this rebuttal, and which one respondents saw was randomly determined. Some respondents were not presented with any rebuttals. Our goal was to look at how the form a rebuttal takes can influence its effectiveness.

Key Findings:

- **Rebuttals are sometimes effective, but rumor beliefs are robust**
 - Overall, only 35% of participants who had encountered the rumor before and believed it held more accurate beliefs after reading the rebuttal, and even fewer, about 28%, were moved to reject the rumor.
 - Both a simple text-only rebuttal and the same rebuttal paired with an image of the Imam dress in Western-style business clothing contributed to more accurate beliefs.
 - About a quarter (26%) of all subjects who were initially unsure about the veracity of the rumor or who believed the rumor was true described the rumor as false after seeing one of these two rebuttals.

- **Rebuttals can be undermined by accompanying information**
 - Including information unrelated to the rumor, but which some recipients found objectionable, sapped the rebuttal of its power to influence people's beliefs. The information in this case was a statement made by the Imam that U.S. foreign policy may have contributed to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.
 - Including information that reinforced social distance between the target of the rumor and the recipient of the rebuttal also rendered the rebuttal ineffective. In this case, including an image that highlighted the Imam's Muslim-American identity undermined the factual information included in the rebuttal.

- **Rebuttals did not drive people to less accurate beliefs in this study**
 - Efforts to produce a boomerang or backfire effect consistently failed. Factual information presented in ways that *could* have caused individuals to embrace their inaccurate beliefs did not do so.
 - Rumor beliefs were not driven up by either (1) a rebuttal that visually highlighted the ways in which the Imam's cultural background makes him different from most Americans, or (2) a rebuttal that emphasized that he holds viewpoints that some Americans would find objectionable.

Table 1. Belief in Rumor about Imam by Condition

Rebuttal presented*		% Probably/ Definitely True	% Probably/ Definitely False	% Unsure
Straight text rebuttal (N=149) :				
	Pre-Rebuttal	24	48	28
	Post-Rebuttal	22	62	16
	Difference +/-	-2	+14	-12
Rebuttal with image emphasizing low social distance (N=148):				
	Pre-Rebuttal	36	39	25
	Post-Rebuttal	26	55	20
	Difference +/-	-10	+16	-5
No rebuttal (control) (N=154):				
	Pre-Rebuttal	31	31	38
	Post-Rebuttal	35	34	30
	Difference +/-	+4	+3	-8

** Only conditions significantly different from control are presented. These data are not based on a representative sample, so the proportions of people who believe the rumors reported here do not necessarily reflect the national average.*

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Survey Data Collection & Analysis: The survey was conducted between September 14th and September 19th, 2010. The sample included 750 adults representing a heterogeneous cross-section of Americans. Respondents were recruited from a national online panel administered by Survey Sampling International. Because this is not a representative sample, the proportion of people who have heard or believed the rumors reported here should not be taken to reflect the national average. Instead, the analyses reported here focus on differences in exposure and belief associated with different kinds of media use. All results employ statistical controls for key demographics, religious and political orientations, and attention to news about the mosque. This means that the patterns observed are not the result of difference on these attributes.

Table 2. Respondent Demographics

Demographic	% of Respondents
Gender	
Male	45
Female	55
Age	
18-35	44
36-50	26
51-65	22
Over 65	8
Education	
High School or less	23
Some College/ 2yr Degree	40
4yr College Degree or more	37
Race	
White	83
Black	7
Other	10
Household Income	
Less than \$50,000	60
\$50,000 - \$74,999	19
\$75,000 or more	21

Demographic	% of Respondents
Religion	
Evangelical Protestant	27
Mainline Protestant	17
Catholic	20
Atheist/Agnostic	22
Jewish	3
Other	11
Political Party	
Democrat/Lean Democrat	40
Independent	28
Republican/Lean Republican	32
Political Ideology	
Liberal	30
Moderate	37
Conservative	33

About the rumor and rebuttals:

The false rumor that was the subject of this study is a statement that “Feisal Abdul Rauf, the Imam backing the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque, is a terrorist-sympathizer who refuses to condemn Islamic attacks on civilians.” There is no evidence that this statement is true according to FactCheck.org, a fact checking service run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center and Politifact, the Pulitzer-prize winning service of the St. Petersburg Times.

The rebuttals are summaries of information provided on FactCheck.org, and were supplemented with information from the *Washington Post*.

Straight-text rebuttal:

Factcheck.org, an award-winning nonpartisan, nonprofit "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics, examined the issue. They wrote that they found no evidence that Feisal Abdul Rauf was anti-American or a terrorist-sympathizer. In fact, Mr. Abdul Rauf has been a vocal critic of Islamic extremists and has condemned their use of violent attacks. He has a history of supporting U.S. initiatives designed to stop Muslim extremism that dates back to the Bush administration.

In both 2007 and 2010 he traveled through the Middle East to talk about religious tolerance as part of a speaker program sponsored by the American State Department. And in a recent interview with the *Washington Post* he spoke about the group proposing to build a Muslim community center near ground zero: “We are not the extremists. We are that vast majority of Muslims who stand up against extremism and provide a voice in response to the radical rhetoric.”

Text rebuttal with objectionable information (bolded here for clarity):

Factcheck.org, an award-winning nonpartisan, nonprofit "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics, examined the issue. They wrote that they found no evidence that Feisal Abdul Rauf was anti-American or a terrorist-sympathizer. In fact, Mr. Abdul Rauf has been a vocal critic of Islamic extremists and has condemned their use of violent attacks. **Although Mr. Adbul Rauf has said that the U.S. bears responsibility for harm caused by its policies toward the Middle East, he is quick to point out that terrorism is never justified.**

And in a recent interview with the *Washington Post* he spoke about the group proposing to build a Muslim community center near ground zero: “We are not the extremists. We are that vast majority of Muslims who stand up against extremism and provide a voice in response to the radical rhetoric. **Our mission is to interweave America’s Muslim population into mainstream society. We are a Muslim-American force for promoting the universal values of justice and peaceful coexistence...**”

Images paired with straight-text rebuttal:

Low social distance



Credit: DNAinfo/Julie Shapiro

High social distance



Credit: Hasan Jamali/AP

For more information on rumors and rebuttals about the proposed mosque near Ground Zero, see:

<http://factcheck.org/2010/08/questions-about-the-ground-zero-mosque/>

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2010/aug/20/fact-checking-ground-zero-mosque-debate/>

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

What do we mean by rumors?

Rumors are unverified information that people share in an attempt to make sense of a difficult or troubling situation. Interest in rumors is not the mark of foolishness or naivety, nor must their spread be purposeful or malicious. Rumors are a by-product of the fact that we are social creatures with a deep need to make sense of the world. Political rumoring has long history. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides wrote about their importance more than two millennia ago.

How are false rumors different from misinformation?

Rumors are unsubstantiated: their persuasive power stems from their plausibility, from how successfully they address a pressing concern, from how well they line up with the recipient's prior beliefs, and so forth. Misinformation, in contrast, is a false claim that is presented as accurate and verified. Furthermore, although both rumors and misinformation can be motivated by a political agenda, rumors do not have to be. Misinformation is by definition an intentional distortion of fact. False rumors, in contrast, may be intentional, but they do not have to be. Propaganda rumors and whispering campaigns use innuendo and hearsay in an attempt to hurt a candidate or reduce support for an issue. Political rumors, however, can also emerge spontaneously and honestly as groups of people work to make sense of a complex situation.

How do we know these rumors are false? Why did we pick these rumors?

We selected these rumors because professional fact-checking services have reported that they are false. We intentionally choose some rumors that were well known, and some that were more obscure. We don't claim that these are a representative sample of the rumors about this issue. Also, we note that rumors by their nature are constantly evolving, so the statements we asked about are only a snapshot of rumors at a moment in time.

Does believing a false rumor mean that a person is ignorant, unintelligent or prejudiced?

We all have limits about what we know, and that doesn't mean that everyone lacks education or the ability to learn. When trying to make sense of a large and complicated world, people must rely on mental shortcuts. Sometimes our beliefs are based on what seems plausible; sometimes they depend on what someone we trust told us. These shortcuts often work very well, but they aren't perfect. Sometimes a plausible explanation isn't the right one, and sometimes the sources we trust are wrong.

Belief in a false rumor often does reflect bias, but it's important to remember that we are *all* influenced by biases. We trust some sources more than others, not simply because we are ideologues, but because our experience tells us that those sources have performed better in the past. We trust some interpretations more than others not because we are blind to the truth, but because we are skeptical when someone tries to convince us that what we believe to be true is false. We wonder, for example, does that person have some other motive? Biased judgment can occur even when people have the best of intentions.