

FOX NEWS CONTRIBUTES TO SPREAD OF RUMORS ABOUT PROPOSED NYC MOSQUE

*CNN and NPR promote more accurate beliefs; Belief in rumors associated with
opposition to the NYC mosque and to mosques in general*

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

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OVERVIEW

Traditionally, the mass media is seen by the public as a key resource for accurate information and playing crucial role in raising awareness of rumor rebuttals, which are intended to correct false information. However, with the rise of politically polarizing information sources on cable news and talk radio, the question arises whether the mass media continues to be a resource for accurate information or becomes a party to spreading false information and misperceptions.

The mass media as a citizen resource for accurate information becomes especially tested in cases of intense, politically polarizing controversy, such as the debate over the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque project near Ground Zero in New York City. According to Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) News Coverage Index, the controversy dominated news coverage for several weeks this past summer, especially on cable news and talk radio. As PEJ noted, "conservatives decried the proposal as an affront to the victims of the terror attacks. Liberal hosts portrayed the reaction as xenophobic and contrary to American ideals of religious freedom."¹

In addition, previous research has shown that the mass media has a poor track record on reporting about Islam and Muslim Americans, often contributing to negative stereotypes and attitudes about Islam, Muslim Americans, and their civil liberties. Media researchers have long argued that the American press have adopted a conflict narrative that negatively influences the preponderance of their reporting about Islam and worsens intergroup relations. Others have argued that American media disproportionately link Islam to terrorism and do not sufficiently differentiate between Islam as a whole and radical Islamists in their reporting.

In this context, this study examines how reliance on specific media outlets for news and information is associated with the exposure to and belief in false rumors about the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque near Ground Zero. In addition, the study also examines what impact belief in false rumors has on opposition to the proposed mosque project, as well as opposition to the building of mosques in general.

¹ See http://www.journalism.org/index_report/mosque_controversy_iraq_war_dominate_news

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. Though not a representative sample, participants represent a diverse cross-section of Americans. All results reported here 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.

The four false rumors included in the study are listed below. There is no evidence that these statements are true according to either FactCheck.org, a fact checking service run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, or Politifact, the Pulitzer-prize winning service of the St. Petersburg Times.

- 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.
- The Muslim groups building the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque have deep ties to radical anti-American and anti-Semitic organizations.
- The proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque near Ground Zero is scheduled to open on September 11, 2011 in celebration of the 10-year anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks.
- The money for the proposed Islamic cultural center is coming primarily from foreign financial backers associated with terrorist organizations in Saudi Arabia and Iran.²

Key Findings:

- **People who use Fox News, either online or on television, are more aware of false rumors about the Islamic community center and mosque than those who do not.**
 - o For example, respondents who reported a low reliance on Fox News stated hearing 1.4 rumors (out of 4) on average. In comparison, if the same respondent reported a high reliance on Fox News, they would report hearing 1.9 rumors on average, an increase of 35%.
 - o In contrast, reliance on other cable news networks, including CNN and MSNBC, does not influence rumor exposure.
 - o We can only speculate about why this is. For example, perhaps Fox News spent a disproportionate amount of time covering the issue. Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism August 16-22 News Coverage Index noted cable news "coverage [of the mosque controversy] was intense" with conservative commentators strongly attacking the proposed mosque project and devoting significant airtime to the issue (see <http://www.journalism.org>).

² The rumor about funding for the proposed mosque is unverified, but not unambiguously false as no money had yet been raised. However, backers of the project have stated publicly that the majority of the funding will come from sources within the United States, that they will fully disclose funding sources in compliance with State and Federal law, and that they will vet investors with the help of the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

- We also cannot say whether this finding was due to exposure to Fox’s hard news programming, its editorial programming, or its website. The survey did not distinguish between these different aspects of the news network.
- **People who use Fox News believe more of the rumors we asked about and they believe them more strongly than those who do not.**
 - For example, a typical respondent who reported a low reliance on Fox News believed .9 rumors on average. If that same respondent reported a high reliance on Fox News, the average number of rumors believed increased by 66% to 1.5.
 - This is not just a product of increased exposure. Even among people with comparable rumor exposure, those who got their news from Fox believed more rumors.
- **People who use CNN and NPR believe fewer false rumors.**
 - For example, a typical respondent who relied on CNN very little believed 1.5 rumors on average. If that same respondent reported high reliance on CNN the average number of rumors believed decreased by 23% to 1.0. Likewise, a respondent who had a low reliance on National Public Radio for news and information believed 1.2 rumors on average. In contrast, if the same respondent relied heavily on NPR they would believe .9 rumors on average, a decrease of 25%.
 - This was true whether the individual used Fox News or not, and the relationship did not depend on the number of rumors heard.
 - Again we can only speculate about the reasons. For example, perhaps these networks present factually accurate information in a way that news consumer find particularly persuasive.
- **Newspapers are uniquely effective at getting accurate political information to their readers.**
 - Newspaper use was associated with greater exposure to rumor rebuttals, which strongly promoted more accurate rumors beliefs. Increased reliance on newspapers for news and information increased exposure to rebuttals by 67% between low and high users (.3 rebuttals for low newspaper users, .5 rebuttals for high).
 - This is not just because newspaper readers are uniquely attuned to politics. Comparing people who paid comparable attention to the proposed mosque controversy produced the same results. In effect, newspapers seem to have more capacity than other news media in effectively conveying accurate facts to consumers.
 - The survey did not distinguish between local and national newspapers.
- **Conservative talk radio use was also associated with more rumor exposure.**
 - Respondents who reported a low reliance on conservative talk radio heard 1.5 rumors on average, compared to respondents who reported a high reliance who heard 2.0 rumors on average, an increase of 33%.

- Again, we can only speculate why this might be. Perhaps it is related to the fact that the topic was widely discussed on talk radio programming. According to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, a quarter of political talk radio airtime was spent discussing the mosque controversy during a one-week period in August.
- **Use of network broadcast TV news is associated with lower rumor exposure.**
 - Higher reliance on national broadcast evening news on ABC, CBS, or NBC decreased exposure to rumors by 22% (from 1.8 rumors at a low level of reliance to 1.4 rumors at a high level).
 - This is not simply because broadcast TV news users were less likely to get their news from other sources: it is true even among people who use other sources, including Fox, at comparable levels. This suggests that people who used both broadcast news and Fox may have used the cable network differently than those who used only Fox.
 - It may also be related to the fact that network broadcast evening news on ABC, CBS, and NBC only had a total of 18 news reports on the NYC mosque controversy across for an estimated total of 32 minutes of reporting across all three channels between May and September 2010 according to archived broadcasts at the Tyndall Report (<http://tyndallreport.com/tyndallsearch>). Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism also reported that total cables news coverage of the proposed mosque controversy was three times the total coverage (29% of the cable news hole vs. 9% of the broadcast news hole) on network news.
- **Belief in rumors about the proposed mosque in NYC was not only significantly associated with opposition to the proposed NYC mosque project, but also associated with opposition to the building of mosques generally**
 - Predicted opposition to the proposed NYC mosque project increased from 66% of those people who believed none of the rumors to 82% among those who believed 3 or more of the rumors. Rumor beliefs were associated with increasing opposition regardless of the individual's attitudes toward Muslims generally.
 - Predicted opposition to the building of a mosque in a respondent's own neighborhood increased from 39% of those people who believed none of the rumors to 63% among those who believed 3 or more of the rumors.
 - Although we cannot say definitively that increasing rumor beliefs cause these changes, because it could work the other way around, it seems highly likely that beliefs in these false statements are influential.

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, belief, and support for the proposed NYC mosque associated with different kinds of media use and exposure or belief in the rumors. All results employ statistical controls for key demographics, religious and political orientations, media use, and attention to news about the mosque. This means that the patterns observed are not the result of difference on these attributes.

Table 1. Average Number of Rumors Heard, by Reliance on Information Source

Media Usage Level ^a	Fox News on TV or online	Conservative talk radio	National Broadcast Evening News on ABC, CBS, NBC
Low	1.4	1.5	1.8
High	1.9	2.0	1.4

Notes: Only media that had a statistically significant influence on rumor exposure are shown. These estimates are based on a statistical model (Poisson regression) that also controlled for use of other media, gender, age, education, race, household income, church attendance, evangelical Christianity, ideology, political party, and attention to news about the NYC mosque controversy. a. "Low" is defined as one standard deviation below the mean level of media use and "High" is one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 2. Average Number of Rumors Believed, by Reliance on Information Source

Media Usage Level ^a	Fox News on TV or online	CNN or CNN Headline News on TV or online	NPR Radio Programming
Low	.9	1.3	1.2
High	1.5	1.0	0.9

Notes: Only media that had a statistically significant influence on rumor beliefs are shown. These estimates are based on a statistical model (Poisson regression) that also controlled for use of other media, rumor exposure, gender, age, education, race, household income, church attendance, evangelical Christian, ideology, political party, and attention to news about the NYC mosque controversy. a. "Low" is defined as one standard deviation below the mean level of media use and "High" is one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 3. Support For Mosque Construction, by Belief in Rumors

Belief in Number of Rumors	% Oppose Proposed Mosque in NYC	% Oppose Building Mosque in Own Neighborhood
0	66	39
1-2	77	40
3-4	82	63

Notes: These estimates are based on a statistical model (binary logistic regression) that also controlled for media use, rumor exposure, rebuttal exposure, gender, age, education, race, household income, church attendance, evangelical Christian, ideology, political party, and attention to news about the NYC mosque controversy, and experimental condition.

Table 4. 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

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.

How can we say the Fox News is promoting the spread of rumors when we didn't actually look at its programming?

In this study, the results are very clear: the more people use Fox News, the more rumors they have heard and the more they believe. We interpret this to mean that exposure to the news network promotes rumor contact and belief. There are other interpretations, but we think our interpretation is most sensible. For example, it could be that there is a factor that makes it more likely both that people will watch Fox News *and* that they will hear these rumors. It is widely recognized that Fox News is watched more widely by Republicans than by Democrats. Therefore, if Republicans are also uniquely receptive to the rumors we asked about, it would suggest that being Republican is the driving force behind both outcomes. But this is not the case. We asked respondents about their party affiliation, and we use this information in our analyses. We find that even among Republicans, use of Fox News is associated with more rumor exposure.

Since Fox News is associated with the spread of these rumors, would it be more accurate to call them misinformation?

The label misinformation implies that the inaccurate information is being presented as fact and is being intentionally circulated in an effort to mislead, that is, to obscure the truth. This is in contrast to rumors, which attempt to provide plausible explanations when the truth is unknown. We have not analyzed Fox News' programming content, and our only evidence about network executives' intentions is what they say in public. Based on this, we have no reason to believe that Fox News is purposefully promoting the spread of false information.