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#Rumors: A Roundtable Discussion with Mladen Dolar, Richard Dyer, Alexandra Juhasz, Tavia Nyong'o, Marc Siegel, and Patricia Turner

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Abstract

Unverified beliefs and truth-claims have been topics of enduring fascination for scholars of media and culture, gaining renewed urgency with the viral spread of fake news via social media and the bitter attacks on scientific knowledge amid the Covid pandemic and climate crisis. In this roundtable discussion, we gather six distinguished thinkers to help us understand rumors, gossip, and the broader allure and danger of unsubstantiated information. With their wide-ranging expertise, our six panelists address the ramifications of rumors and gossip for queer underground cinema, political allegory, star and celebrity cultures, AIDS and Covid media activism, racialised belief systems, and the status of truth and logos in our time.

Keywords: rumors, gossip, legends, conspiracies, misinformation, fake news, post-truth, virality

Was Jacques Lacan duping us when he stated that ‘the non-duped err’? In this roundtable discussion, we gather six distinguished thinkers to help us understand rumors, gossip, and the broader allure and danger of unverified information. Indeterminate, often-illegitimate beliefs and truth-claims have been a topic of enduring fascination for scholars of media and culture, gaining new urgency with the viral spread of fake news via social media and the attacks on scientific knowledge amid the Covid pandemic and climate crisis. Where rumors circulate widely and anonymously – beyond local contexts

and without an ascertainable source – gossip is shared more intimately, connected to specific people we know or recognise. As a form of interpersonal bonding and ‘reputation management’, gossip has also been deployed by feminist, queer, and anti-racist movements as a crucial tool of survival, resistance, and fabulative world-making. At the same time, the conversion of unsubstantiated hearsay into conspiratorial conviction may further open the door to far-right demagoguery, corporate profiteering, and the pervasive dismantling of spaces and networks necessary to sustain activism and critical thought.

With their broad-ranging expertise, our six panelists address the ramifications of rumors and gossip for queer underground cinema, political allegory, star and celebrity cultures, AIDS and Covid media activism, racialised belief systems, and the status of truth and logos in our time. The following discussion unfolded over Google Docs in the early months of 2022. It has been edited for flow and coherence.

Nicholas Baer & Maggie Hennefeld: We are delighted to assemble this multidisciplinary and international panel to explore the topic of rumors and gossip. To begin, could you each give an example of a rumor or gossip item that you have encountered recently and explain how it bears on your thinking?

Marc Siegel: I’m happy to start off. While revising a book chapter about the New York underground film scene, I recently recalled my discussions from almost ten years ago with the great underground drag superstar Mario Montez. While talking about Ronald Tavel, the brilliant screenwriter for many of Andy Warhol’s films and co-founder of the Theatre of the Ridiculous, Mario hinted that he and Tavel were intimate. Intrigued and titillated, I pushed further and Mario admitted that he and Tavel were lovers throughout the entire period they worked together on the Warhol films! That was a revelation for me. I realise fully that this gossip might mean nothing to some of you. That’s part of how gossip works, right? That it circulates indiscreetly only among those who feel some kind of connection to the illicit information being passed on. For me, the dirt about Montez and Tavel opened up in a new way into the interpersonal relationships within Warhol’s Factory scene. Since the Factory films seem so directly to represent the relations behind the camera and often get read that way – the films indeed can be seen as constituting gossip about the scene itself – I find it productive to take account of the sexual relationship between Montez and Tavel when, say, considering the erotic tension of their contestatory exchange in Screen Test #2 (1965). In fact, knowing this bit of gossip could help people better understand that tension as erotic.

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Tavia Nyong'o: That's indeed a juicy one, Marc. The Warhol Factory is the gift that keeps on giving. The first example that comes to mind is from a recent film, *Don't Look Up*, a film that a lot of people didn't like but I did. *Don't Look Up* concerns the discovery of a 'planet-killing' asteroid headed towards earth, and the cynical incompetence with which even this existential threat is met by our malignant rulers. At one point late in the film, the astronomer who discovered the asteroid is hanging out next to a dumpster with a group of teenage burnouts who are idly speculating about why the president and her allies have failed to act rationally to preserve even their own lives. I heard they have a ship, one burnout says, to which the astronomer responds impatiently: you don't get it, they are not even smart enough to have that! They are just really that incompetent.

By the end of the film, the asteroid does hit the earth, destroying all life. But in a comic twist, the elites really *did* have a space ship, and 2000 lucky ones blast off, in cryogenic slumber, in search of the next livable planet. This is not a happy ending, of course. What purpose does it then serve? *Don't Look Up* is intended as an allegory of climate change, another existential threat that, by all the evidence, global elites plan to ignore. They ignore it because they imagine they will evade its worst impact, if not with a rocket ship, then with gated communities, off-shore islands, and so forth. But maybe with a rocket ship too! To me the scene by the dumpster thus concerns the popular ability to intuit something about the nature of power via the circulation of rumor. It therefore reminds me of Lacan's gnomic utterance, in one of his seminars, that when it comes to the analysis of power 'the non-duped err'. Being susceptible to rumor is being susceptible to being duped, and the burnouts are certainly represented as gullible slackers – the useful idiots of late capitalism. But in *Don't Look Up* they actually turn out to know something that the 'non-duped' astronomer won't permit herself to believe: the ultra-wealthy really do plan to survive the catastrophe they are letting coalesce around us all.





Figs. 1, 2, 3: *Don't Look Up* (Adam McKay, 2021)

Richard Dyer: Interesting about duped and non-duped, Tavia, and the issue of truth and gossip/rumour. My gossip seems to consist less in recounting things that have happened than in picking over what the person I am gossiping with and I both think about what has happened. Recent cases: why did a friend, apparently unprovoked, snap at a group of friends and then ring the next day to say that he had a cold and couldn't come as planned (so including the 'truth' of that cold)?; what do we think about the outcome of a conduct case brought against a friend?; what are the pros and cons of the people who were in the running to be our head of department? And so on – more Anton Chekhov or Barbara Pym than Kenneth Anger. A lot of recent talk is about illness, sometimes Covid but more the many predations of age. But I'm not sure if this is gossip, since they do not involve revelations about and discussions of character.

Siegel: Those are productive observations and distinctions, Tavia and Richard. I think that the gossip among some of my friends (and I do calibrate any individual gossip I spread to fit to the context of the specific friends I'm talking to – I imagine we all do, otherwise the gossip falls flat) brings Anger-level hearsay and speculation to bear on our local (Chekovian or

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Pymian, to keep with Richard's references) social scenes. Or it could be seen as going in the opposite direction: raising our humble comings-and-goings to the level of grand ol' silver screen outrageous, excessive, or sexually and emotionally transgressive behavior. It's a fun way for us to remain interested and excited about others and the potential of our interactions with them. I wonder, Richard, if gossip about stars can add not only information or perspectives that could enhance analyses of performances but if it also can serve as a model of critical analysis itself (engaging in speculation with friends about details of other people's behavior so as to generate fabulous stories, moments, situations). To pick up on Tavia's example, it seems that gossip relies on our capacity to believe, even if contingently, what confidantes say about others. Being open to being duped is part of the fun and essential to this mode of knowledge production. Although maybe with gossip, you're never really duped in the same way as with rumor. Gossip seems more honest about its speculative nature, tied to specific people and our assessment of the reliability of what they pass along, whereas rumors circulate independently of specific intimate contexts. This is not to say that gossip has a greater claim to truth, just a different one.

Dyer: I agree about the upfront speculative nature of gossip, which gives it the academic virtues of caution, qualification, awareness of limitations of knowledge, although perhaps often in a semi bad faith: 'someone told me that x...' easily and often swiftly becomes 'the fact that x...' I also agree about gossip serving as a kind of critical framework vis-à-vis stars.

Mladen Dolar: The most conspicuous rumors that I heard in the last couple of years are the ones concerning the Covid pandemic going around. By this I of course don't mean that it is not real or that it could be relegated to mere rumors, rather the reverse. I mean that rumors share some structural traits with the pandemic, if not quite pandemic most of the time then the structure of contagion and infectiousness – not to be taken lightly. There is reality in the rumors. For historic precedents one can mention Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), where the plague itself is preceded and at all times accompanied by the rumors about the plague, to the point that the plague can serve as a metaphor of rumors, or that the rumors themselves function like a plague of sorts. Defoe's account, by the way, written almost 60 years after the event (the plague in London in 1665), is however not so much based on rumors, but is surprisingly accurate (in many ways better than contemporary accounts), relying on serious research. Of course one can say this is a metaphor, but there is a strange overlap or short-circuit concerning the mechanism of contagion.

The trouble with rumors is that they may be unsubstantiated and without a provable source or authority, but they stick, like a virus. There is a Latin adage: *Audacter calumniare, semper aliquid haeret*, 'Slander boldly, something will always stick'. They remind us of a certain

'magic' property of the word, namely that it doesn't merely describe a certain state of affairs but brings it about, however baseless it may be, and affects/infects reality. The slanderous qualification, spreading from mouth to mouth, will infect the person in question or qualify a state of affairs even if everybody knows that this is a mere rumor. What I am interested in is this contagious viral capacity of the word, which is also profoundly ambiguous, not simply bad in itself, for to combat bad rumors one also has to rely on the viral capacity of 'logos', to make it quick. In the present pandemic situation one can see that there is a symptomatic agency of rumors which try to relegate the seriousness of the pandemic to mere rumor and can engage vast and violent anti-vaxxer and anti-measures movements in many countries, including my own, across the political spectrum, venting very real social discontent and rage, although canalised in spurious ways. It's a very symptomatic situation where the 'real' pandemic is paralleled with the pandemic of rumors; the latter cannot be quite disentangled from the former. The elusive dividing line of 'scientific knowledge, protective measures etc. vs. rumors' is at the same time the locus where social antagonisms are played out, magnified by the terrific speed of spreading both information and toxic rumors, the inextricable mix of the two, through social media.

Baer & Henefeld: We want to pick up on Marc's distinction between rumors and gossip along with Mladen's discussion of the pandemic and social media. What are the relations and key differences between rumors, gossip, fabrication, legend, folklore, conspiracy, hearsay, slander, calumny, scandal, and any other terms that you have used in your work? And how do Covid and the contemporary digital mediascape realign the semantic forcefield?

Alexandra Juhasz: Drawing from my work in AIDS and Covid media activism, I'd like to add four terms to the conversation: disclosure, exposure, undetectability, and also virality. My work tracks how activists use technologies tactically to slow or alter the spread of viruses as well as the bodily and social harms which adhere to them unjustly. So yes, all mediascapes realign semantic forcefields (and the practices they expose), even as viruses – and the capitalism and racism that particularly exacerbate their lived effects – have persisted, and also adapted across the decades of my own engagements. Sometimes activism produces semantic and lived adaptations – say, changing the definition of AIDS to include opportunistic infections experienced by women; or adding the term longhauling to the Covid lexicon – and as often, activist media is in response or repair mode to toxic ecosystems.

While I don't want to be overly techno-deterministic, as an activist competing with mis- and the lack of information, while at the same time using media to share knowledge and build community, the changes in media forcefields – and what we do with this, tactically – are based within shifting norms built around access, visibility, and silence. Thus, disclosure,

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exposure, and detectability can be mediated for the purposes of empowerment, even as they can be used as tools of punishment, disgrace, and stigma. Activists invent, re-use, or alter the norms of information flow so as to contest, repair, and build what is available to us from the wreckage and detritus of punitive hegemonic culture.

Marc and I go way back, and his story reminds me of several previous epochs (not this one, I'm afraid), and their related (activist) media forcefields. First, of the ways that gossip and its mediations are particularly gay! When to be gay was to be closeted (to not disclose), when to be gay was to be HIV positive (but undetectable), when to be gay was to get yourself to a ghetto where the closet and detectability worked differently – as often times fun or campy, sexy or political – in some local and sub-cultural community. When all this would move again similarly to a local, then larger sub-cultural community via the sweet limits of film. Perhaps my point is clear and self-evident. Viral media have changed each and every one of these terms and practices connected to what I think of as the pleasures of gay gossip.

I will conclude by adding to our conversation another kind of reverse, negative, and I hope also revelatory pressure: the unpleasurable space that secrets (and their related gossip) can sometimes play within the forcefields of the heteronormative (and sometimes queer) nuclear family (versus, say, a chosen gay ghetto). Thinking about the first question, the gossip which is fundamentally altering my local world currently – spread only via the technology of the phone due to Covid, as well as its profound potency – is about incest. In this instance, the erotic charge of secrets exposed opens up awful glimmers of the darkest, saddest corners of the home and family, sucking in relatives, friends, medical professionals, and perhaps the law into its unknowable black hole; a technology of destruction, a semantic forcefield of the unspeakable. I'm not sure I could even use the word 'gossip' to describe this particular clandestine information flow, given my sense of gossip's queer indulgences. Thus, I would venture that the content in semantic flows of gossip is less critical than are the forcefields that hold it: the ways and means, the pressures and affects, the places and connections of exposure.

Dyer: I suppose I do distinguish between gossip and rumour, in that I think of the former as something that somebody tells me about someone we both, or just they, or just someone they know, know(s), whereas rumour circulates at a greater distance and is unsourced (as in Tavia's scene from *Don't Look Up*, where it's not clear where anyone gets the idea that 'they have a ship'). Picking up on Alex's comments, I'm struck by how important the revelation of a secret is in some forms of gossip (and this has been especially true in relation to queer gossip), which means it is also fundamentally melodramatic, a forcing into visibility of something that 'ought' to be kept hidden or not to be at all. Two thoughts on this: it may be

that this works especially well (because there is always a textual/discursive advantage at play in these matters) with invisible or out-of-sight groups and practices (not just LGBTQ but also Jews and people of mixed race, some kinds of disability, and no doubt other groupings); what counts as the secret worth telling, at least in cultural products rather than conversation, changes historically (financial scandal is a bedrock of Victorian fiction, adultery no longer scandalises quite in the way it did).

Siegel: I would make similar distinctions between gossip and rumor to the ones Richard offers. (Love the idea about the melodrama of spreading gossip!) If I remember correctly, Gayatri Spivak wrote that ‘rumor evokes comradeship’. Gossip, however, necessitates it – at least contingently. Gossip is more fundamentally linked to people, their desires and dreams and comings-and-goings. Both in the sense of the context and content of its transmission. People do spread rumors, of course, but the rumors themselves don’t necessarily need to be about other people. They could be, but they can just as easily be about larger social and political issues, like war, inflation, institutions. They’re unsourced, as Richard put it, and they can spread broadly, indifferent to the local context of interpersonal exchange. But one only spreads gossip with intimates – contingent comrades. Maybe those are a few other terms I’d add: intimacy and trust.

I realise I’m pushing a somewhat romanticised view of gossip, as if this idle talk can be cleansed of its unsavory elements. Or I’m relying on interpersonal gossip as a model for understanding how gossip functions and then differentiating it from the impersonal spread of rumors. My example of the Mario Montez gossip above certainly references an earlier period in queer culture, one implicated in a different mediascape than the one we encounter today. But I’m not so sure that the lessons learned and pleasures gained by engaging in that mode of gossip are so dramatically altered by the changes of viral media. As Alex points out, the content of gossip is less critical than the forcefields that sustain it. I’d say the same thing about the gossip about someone’s sexual identity. Isn’t that one of the key lessons of the practice of outing, as engaged by AIDS and queer activists – and articulated by Douglas Crimp – that it’s less important that Jodie is a lesbian than that ‘we’ are? That the gossip behind the scandal of public disclosure is more important for what it says about our pleasures, desires, and hopes for a world of difference and multiplicity.

Dolar: I largely agree with what has already been suggested. It’s useful to distinguish rumors, whose source cannot be ascertained; one merely hears them and passes them on without subscribing to them (although this neutrality is highly questionable, there can be a lot of Schadenfreude attached to it, evasion of any responsibility for what can have very damaging effects), and on the other hand gossip as social networking and ‘reputation

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management'. Gossip, to quote a dictionary, stems from 'Old English *godsibb* "sponsor, godparent", from God + *sibb* "relative" (see sibling). Extended in Middle English to "a familiar acquaintance, a friend, neighbor" [...] later to "anyone engaging in familiar or idle talk" (1560s). Sense extended 1811 to "trifling talk, groundless rumor."

Gossip establishes a tie beyond blood, family, and social hierarchies; it refers to the horizontal ties and may be as old as humanity. There is a nice book by Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (1996), where the author (an anthropologist) maintains that gossip is a fundamental 'originary' function of language, taking over the function of grooming in monkey societies (like 'grooming at a distance'), the establishment of social ties and divisions rather than imparting information. One basic function of gossip is the division into in-groups and out-groups – there are the ones with whom one pleurably shares gossip and establishes an intimacy, but usually at the expense of the exclusion of others, with constantly shifting boundaries. Friendly gossip, a most necessary form of social engagement and interest, indeed intelligence, has the nasty tendency of slipping into a cut-throat thing. With gossip there is usually a source, and it's about the people one knows, the circle within which one has to manage one's standing; or else, congregating under the auspices of stars of one kind or another (film, pop, royals, celebrities).

Both rumors and gossip are different from conspiracy theories, where what is at stake is not a 'neutral' stance of not subscribing to rumors nor the horizontal social networking, but rather an adamant conviction about the true state of affairs that would have to come to light and is being obfuscated by some systematic concerted effort – everybody is collaborating or duped, except 'us'. It's a question of true knowledge, possessed by a few vs. a massive false appearance. They are the obverse side of rumors, they try to convert rumors into a system and a hidden clue, a source of true knowledge vs. the official falsehood; to convert the contingent and baseless into the true base, the hidden hard-core. They are not to be simply discarded, misguided as they are. *Don't Look Up* is a good case in point: there is something like a conspiracy of liberal media, the political establishment, and the corporate world (I particularly like the Mark Rylance character, combining Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates, just as the Meryl Streep character combines Trump and Hillary Clinton) that dismisses the knowledge about the lethal comet, evidenced by science ('true knowledge') – only there is no plot, no organised conspiracy, it's actually far worse. It's a spontaneous conspiracy that no conspiracy theory can account for. There is no mastermind, no master plan; it's a structural conspiracy, more efficient than what conspiracy theories try to conjure. I must refer to the work of my friend Alenka Zupančič on that.

Baer & Hennefeld: Building on this discussion of rumors, gossip, and conspiracy theories, could you tell us more about how developments of the past years (e.g. post-truth politics, the viral spread of fake news and misinformation) have extended, shifted, or even challenged your thinking, especially with regard to the potentials and limitations of rumors as means of resistance or of empowering social justice?

Patricia Turner: When *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (1994) was published and I was questioned about it by journalists and other academics, a fairly common query was some form of ‘why do black people accept such patently untrue information?’ The implicit assumption was the then-classic perception that to uncritically accept bogus information must mean that the believer is paranoid or unintelligent or in some way operating from a deficit position. Even though I tried to anticipate it in the book, it still preoccupied many people who could easily find the flaws in the things African Americans believed but were less likely to see the contradictions in their own beliefs. Even though I wrote the book, in part, to add African Americans to the conversations about rumors, legends, and conspiracy theories, there was still this notion, particularly amongst mainstream white journalists, that it was unlikely that whites would ever fall prey to misinformation.

About a dozen years after *Grapevine* was published, I spent a lot of time documenting racially informed beliefs about Hurricane Katrina (2005). I have spent much of my research time since then looking at the beliefs that have been shared about Barack and Michelle Obama. These forays took me much more into white belief systems and initially the journalists and academics I encountered seemed inclined to dismiss these texts as coming from uneducated fringe communities. If you had asked any of the journalists and academics if they thought that white voters had better critical thinking skills than blacks, they would have denied it. But as I discuss in my forthcoming book *Trash Talk: Anti-Obama Lore and Race in the Twenty-First Century*, one of the major missteps of the first two decades of the twenty-first century was the failure to take seriously just how many people could be swayed by rumors, legends, and conspiracy theories that demonise black people. Only after the election of Donald Trump and the fact that America had fostered a significant voting block to place a rumor-mongering president in the White House did some observers understand. And I still see evidence that many whites just can’t quite accept the evidence that significant portions of ‘their’ brethren are so easily seduced by misinformation and so entrenched in racist ideologies.

I think that within the context of *Grapevine*, ‘resistance’ was largely considered a good thing. If African Americans were able to discourage each other from taking drugs on the grounds that by doing so they were doing what the ‘white man’ wanted them to do, and the end result

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was avoidance of a drug-dependent lifestyle, that was a positive outcome. But if the cohort that we have come to think of as the Trump base accepts that the election was stolen from him and they use that line to inspire people to assault the Capitol, people in my political sphere consider that a very bad thing.

Juhasz: Anything can empower social justice (and injustice): truth, lies, rumors, gossip about the curtailment and unleashing of freedom. Content fuels our forms and processes; as per above, the forcefields that hold and release things and people. This is where our, the people's (and their, the tyrant's) power lies: in our ways of doing. In our current techno-political-economy, information is capital; its connection to the real or the truth is incidental to its function. The destabilisation of knowledge – once a core tactic for the disenfranchised whose access to knowledge production was limited by our access to information technologies (i.e. *The Watermelon Woman*) – is currently a core structure of social media and, I'd gambit, the internet. Capitalists are enriched and their massive power adheres to the flow of content of every and any sort and in every and any direction: gossip, false rumors, life-saving information, fake news. So, at this time (and my point is that this is always time and technology-based, and thus mutable), my hope, activism, and efforts at radical media literacies are placed not in the *what* of knowledge but the *how*: that is, processes of communication that center care, human agency and connection, pleasure, and place. So not gossip in itself but rather where, and how, and why we share it.

Baer & Hennefeld: As your responses suggest, the internet and social media have changed the structures and economies of gossip. Could you say more about how these transformations in the cultural and media landscape have altered the status and function of rumors, including effects on the politics of race and sexuality? Is the difference a matter of scale and/or substance, quantity and/or quality?

Siegel: I'm not yet as convinced as my dear friend Alex that these changes have so radically altered the structures, practices, and pleasures of queer gossip. In some cases they may be reconfigured but they're not fundamentally altered, as far as I can tell. To refer back to your earlier question, making distinctions between terms such as gossip, rumor, and scandal (even if the relations among them fluctuate depending on the context) can allow us to see this better. Gossip in the mode of fostering and sustaining intimacy and enabling the fabulation of a world of queer difference presupposes the interpersonal exchange among confidantes. The viral spread of indiscreet information online or of, say, memes seems in its publicness and lack of a specific addressee (or author in the case of memes) closer to rumor and scandal to me. What we do get online is a whole lot of overheard gossip, like when we're privy to seemingly private or extremely intimate exchanges between others, whether we

seek them out or not. The publicity industry around stars and celebrities has of course exploded, with their Instagram pages collecting millions of followers and a proliferation of outlets (platforms) that could make people massively famous and influential to those who follow them, but often leave them completely unknown to the many more not taking part in that particular platform. Even that fragmentation or proliferation of publics seems to me more a change in scale than substance when thinking of earlier – analog – star and celebrity cultures. The same goes for changes in queer culture, I think. Sure, since there are a greater number of openly LGBTQ* stars, there may be less queer gossip about the sexual identity of stars. Even that depends, I think, on where one is in the world (wide web) – New York or Berlin are likely not the same as Minsk or Beijing. But the pleasures of queer gossip have never been limited to speculating about the sexual identity of others. That's a big part of it and maybe even its *Urszene*, but this richly generative speculative practice unfolds in unexpected ways, in unanticipated directions.

Turner: I often meet younger people who don't really get that rumors, legends, and conspiracy theories existed even before the internet. To be sure, one of the main differences between the time when I was doing fieldwork for *Grapevine* (as well as *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* [2001] with Gary Alan Fine) was the ascendancy of the internet and social media which fueled the spread of information. Like virtually every rumor, legend, and conspiracy theory scholar roughly in my age cohort will attest, the ways in which the folk have operationalised the internet is extraordinary and scholarship on these genres now is incomplete if it doesn't probe the online conduits that are being used.

Nowadays, I am paying more attention to the identities of those doing the using. To be sure, in the past I always tried to talk about the narrator and the narrator's source for the text. But the internet has enabled more savvy individuals/enterprises with 'malice aforethought' to generate rumors in order to make a profit. One example I explore is the birther texts, which were initially kept in play by a few unsavory individuals who found ways of extracting support dollars from anti-Obama folks who would send them money to underwrite their never-ending search for the definitive proof of his ineligibility for the presidency. In addition to folks who figured out how to generate income from perpetuating misinformation, others were driven to create political chaos by creating memes and conspiracy theories and getting them into the social media sphere of those likely to believe them. For example, we know that Russian bots generated all kinds of false accusations about Black Lives Matter chapters in order to further incite white despair over the alleged activities of African Americans.

Dolar: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter emerged around 2006, Instagram in 2010. They are all very recent phenomena, and it is rather staggering that fifteen years on we cannot imagine

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our public and private lives without them. I think it's unprecedented in human history that vast masses of people, including the bulk of public services and politicians, voluntarily moved a vast proportion of their private and social activities to a few privately owned platforms, based on undisclosed algorithms and subject to massive mechanisms of surveillance, control, commercial exploitation, and manipulation. This has greatly contributed to what I called the rumorisation of society, where the rumors start functioning not as an accompanying shadow of public discourse and knowledge (an entertaining or threatening shadow), but have become the general background buzz against which some basic distinctions are increasingly collapsing – private/public, knowledge/opinion, relevant/irrelevant, verified/unverified, decent/indecent.

The previous mass media (press, radio, television) have been overshadowed by this new avalanche which now sets the tone (and particularly after the Twitter presidency). To be sure, these media were far from blameless, a lot of critique was devoted to the massive manipulations involved in the massive mediatisation of society during the previous century. And it's perfectly true that similar alarming tones were sounded at the emergence of mass press. A recent French movie, *Lost Illusions*, based on Balzac's novel, displays how the newly established press in 1830s restoration France prospered on ruthlessly making huge profits on scandals and rumors, kind of mirroring the contemporary age, and many worried about the coming of a post-truth age already then. And one could ironically go back to Plato where already the writing was seen as a danger to truth (Derrida made a big case of it), so that throughout history each new technological development was accompanied by a prospect of catastrophe. One could say that there is nothing really new with the new technologies sounding the death-knell of truth and logos (which seem to have been an endangered species from the very inception of philosophy on). The decline of logos is as old as logos, and the emergence of logos in philosophy was very soon followed by the campaign of sophistry. Still, the massive onslaught of rumorisation seems to bring this to an unprecedented level; the new quantity (concerning speed, global reach, the sheer mass of communication, etc.) may well spell a qualitatively different set-up.

The recent development of capitalism has already prompted the proposals of some new concepts like 'platform capitalism', 'surveillance capitalism', or 'neo-feudalism' – a symptom of a need to re-conceptualise the novelty of the situation in new terms. Rumors are just one telling entry-point into this conundrum, since the new social media are essentially driven by gossip-rumors, with what has been termed 'secondary orality' (and on the other hand the massive flood of images), where nothing quite carries the stamp of the big Other. The classical notion of ideology doesn't quite work any longer. And I am afraid that the more

there is communication (and there has never been so much communication in human history), the more there is a danger that the fabric of social ties may fall apart.

Baer & Hennefeld: We want to pick up on Mladen's claim that rumors are no longer 'an accompanying shadow of public discourse and knowledge (an entertaining or threatening shadow), but have become the general background buzz'. Could others comment on how their work conceives the evolving significance of rumors and gossip in relation to historically variable forms of media and cultural production?

Siegel: In my forthcoming book *A Gossip of Images*, I thought it was important to push beyond a limited idea of gossip as a parasitic discourse or as only adding commentary or speculations to pre-existing images (or people or situations). But the 'did you hear that x did this or that?' doesn't simply recount details of the comings-and-goings of others but actually initiates a speculative process that gathers steam when intimates join in and elaborate on such details to generate newly imagined juicy possibilities or situations – new images. So gossip generates images of its own – gossip-images that have their own temporal and affective complexity. I base this argument on analyses of select films, videos, writings, oral exchanges and more from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Dyer: I certainly think of gossip as something informing cultural production, albeit to varying degrees. In some cases, it really is a defining part of the product, as is the case with stars and *La dolce vita*. But in other cases it may be extraneous and not necessary. To give an example, I don't know that I find Ivor Novello's song 'I'll Follow My Secret Heart' (I realise this is a rather obscure reference for many people) any more poignant for knowing, as I and most of his audience didn't when I and they first heard it, that he was gay. I bridle at the way gossip can come to be a master code for reading a work, as when Tennessee Williams' perception of the situation of women within heterosexuality is recast as 'really' being about drag queens. I don't share the enthusiasm for biography (which seems a never-fading growth area in cultural production) – I am interested in the book or the performance, not the person. Last night I saw the Nureyev biopic *The White Crow*, enjoyable enough, but what did it add to my appreciation (itself not that great) of his dancing to know that his father was largely absent during his childhood and that he, Nureyev, was bisexual? But what I have come to feel very strongly is that gossip is a much better model of our attention to cultural products of all kinds than the ideas of identification and projection that were once so widespread. Gossip is an interest in people, a fascination with them, benign or malign as may be the case, and involves a sense of drawing closer to them without actually imagining one is them or wishes to be, and interested in one's reaction to them, and it is this that I especially drew from the engagement of *La dolce vita* with gossip.

Baer & Hennefeld: To conclude on a reflexive note, what changes have you seen in the broader perception of rumors, gossip, and related genres as matters of academic inquiry? Do these topics hold a special interest for academics in particular, or would you give a different account of rumors and gossip as enduring sources of scholarly fascination?

Turner: I do think that one very positive development stems from an increased awareness of these genres. More academics, journalists, politicians, and lay people know the terminology of fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theory, rumors, and legends. They might not use the same definitions we use in the field but at least there's an awareness. I used to have to do a lot of explaining about what I studied and some were quite dismissive of the whole topic. Why study rumors when you could study poetry? These days many more people at least understand and respect those of us who are trying to make sense of these genres.

Dyer: Gossip is an intense interest in other people one is not with at the time. There may be an analogy between that and the position of being an academic, occupied with something one is not actually 'in' (at the time: one may do the thing one studies, but in itself studying is not the same as doing). So gossip could be seen as an academic *déformation professionnelle* (the French term always seems better to me than 'occupational hazard'). Having said that, I wonder if academics like gossip any more than anyone else. Most people in any kind of network of people (institution, organisation, workplace, extended family, friendship network, etc.) want and probably need to know about other people in it. If we sometimes express embarrassment at it, that is perhaps because it is still widely considered a disreputable, dishonest, and feminine practice that we should be above.

Siegel: Gossip is creative thinking at its best. Being open to the unexpected possibility, generating unanticipated connections between details, collaborative speculation – good gossip sharpens the mind. It is itself academic work, but sometimes a bit more fun and freewheeling.

Dolar: I just want to throw in this quote from Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842), a novel I greatly admire:

[B]ut mortal man – truly, it is hard to understand how your mortal man is made: however banal the news may be, as long as it is news, he will not fail to pass it on to some other mortal, even if it is precisely with the purpose of saying: 'See what a lie they're spreading!' and the other mortal will gladly incline his ear, though afterwards he himself will say: 'Yes, that is a perfectly banal lie, not worthy of any attention!' and thereupon he will set out at once to look for a third mortal, so that, having told him, they can both exclaim with noble indignation: 'What a banal lie!' And it will not fail

to make the rounds of the whole town, and all mortals, however many there are, will have their fill of talking and will then admit that it is unworthy of attention and not worth talking about.

The astounding thing in this passage is of course the sort of off-handed mention of ‘mortal man’, which brings the question of rumors in direct connection with nothing less than our mortality and opens up a whole speculative dimension. Do we trade in rumors in order to counteract our mortality? Are rumors our incipient tie to ‘beyond mortal’? It’s not just the celebrated noble endeavors of spirit that (supposedly) do this, they may have a more trivial base in our propensity to rumors. And of course the passage also points its finger not to the ‘objective’ informational value of rumors (which may be zero, a trifle), but to the production, transmission, and distribution of *jouissance* that ultimately provides the glue of social ties. I like this image – rumors and gossip suspended between immortality and *jouissance*.

Authors

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(1994), *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (with Gary Alan Fine, 2001), and *Trash Talk: Anti-Obama Lore and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (2022).