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IDEA LAB

Rumor's Reasons

By FARHAD MANJOO

In the summer of 2004, Andy Martin, a colorful Web columnist and sometime Republican candidate for state office, put out a press release announcing his sadness at having to “expose” [Barack Obama](#) as a “Muslim who has concealed his religion.” Reporters ignored Martin’s charge, which offered no proof. But the story took root: Martin’s screed bounced about blogs, mutating over the course of a couple years into an e-mail message that suggested the senator is a kind of Muslim Manchurian candidate for the White House.

Though news organizations and fact-checking Web sites like [Snopes.com](#) have debunked the claim, the story just won’t die. In an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll taken in December, 8 percent of respondents thought Obama was Muslim, half as many as correctly identified him as a Protestant.

The Obama-is-a-Muslim rumor does not seem to have hurt the candidate’s fortunes, at least not yet. But the myth’s persistence illustrates a growing cultural vulnerability to rumor. Journalists typically presume that facts matter: show the public what is true, and they will make decisions correctly. Psychologists who study how we separate truth from fiction, however, have demonstrated that the process is not so simple. And because digital technology fosters social networks that are both closely knit and far-flung, rumors are now free to travel widely within certain groups before they meet any opposition from the truth.

Consider, for starters, this paradox of social psychology, a problem for myth busters everywhere: repeating a claim, even if only to refute it, increases its apparent truthfulness. In 2003, the psychologist Ian Skurnik and several of his colleagues asked senior citizens to sit through a computer presentation of a series of health warnings that were

randomly identified as either true or false — for example, “Aspirin destroys tooth enamel” (true) or “Corn chips contain twice as much fat as potato chips” (false). A few days later, they quizzed the seniors on what they had learned.

The psychologists expected that seniors would mistakenly remember some false statements as true. What was remarkable, though, was which claims they most often got wrong — the ones they had been exposed to multiple times. In other words, the more that researchers had stressed that a given warning was false, the more likely seniors were to eventually come to believe it was true. (College students in the study did not make the same mistakes.)

To understand this turnabout, says **Norbert Schwarz**, a psychologist at the [University of Michigan](#) who worked with Skurnik on the study, it helps to know how our brains suss out truth from fiction. To determine the veracity of a given statement, we often look to society’s collective assessment of it. But it is difficult to measure social consensus very precisely, and our brains rely, instead, upon a sensation of familiarity with an idea. You use a rule of thumb: if something seems familiar, you must have heard it before, and if you’ve heard it before, it must be true.

The rule obviously invites many opportunities for error. The seniors in Skurnik’s study couldn’t remember the context in which they had heard the health claims (research shows that we are quick to forget “negation tags,” like whether something is said to be false or a lie), so they relied, instead, on a vague sense of familiarity, which steered them astray. Repetition, psychologists have shown, easily tricks us. Kimberlee Weaver of [Virginia Tech](#) recently found that if one person tells you that something is true many times, you are likely to conclude that the opinion is widely held, even if no one else said a thing about it.

Is myth busting a lost cause? Nicholas DiFonzo, a psychologist at the Rochester Institute of Technology, gives Obama high marks on his handling of the Muslim rumor, particularly a refutation Obama offered during an interview late in January with the Christian Broadcasting

Network. Obama offered a clear, point-by-point rebuttal to every argument in the chain e-mail, and he provided an important alternative story — “dirty tricks.”

But Obama’s well-executed refutation didn’t kill the rumor. One problem is that rumors are rarely static. “You will see them mutate,” says Bill Adair of Politifact.com. “They’ll pick up new pieces, while some pieces drop off. There’s a line that appears in one version now: ‘I checked this out on Snopes, and it’s true.’ ” At some point, it seems, someone added a line like that as a kind of defense mechanism. There’s an arms race between truth and fiction, and at the moment, the truth doesn’t appear to be winning.

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