Philosophical Insights into Rumor Transmission: Case Studies from Bangladesh

Md. Abdullah-All-Mamun

Department of Philosophy University of Barishal

ABSTRACT

During the last few decades, the transmission of rumors has become a serious threat to our informational ecosystems. In general, the spread of false rumors is capable of deceiving and misguiding epistemic agents. This deception can engender social unrest. Researchers from different branches of knowledge have responded to this crisis and conducted extensive research on rumors. In line with existing scholarship, this paper examines the philosophical aspects of rumor transmission in Bangladesh. In order to do so, this paper utilizes the insights of classical and contemporary philosophy to understand the dynamics of rumors in Bangladesh. In doing so, this paper includes case studies from Bangladesh to examine the theories in practical contexts and reveal the cultural and technological dimensions that shape the transmission of rumors. Based on the theoretical analysis and case studies, this paper offers recommendations to mitigate the harmful impact of rumors in Bangladesh and similar societies.

Keywords: Rumor, Gossip, Epistemology, Social media, Justification.

INTRODUCTION

Rumors are often characterized as unofficial and unverified information that spread from person to person on a large scale (Knapp, 1944; Allport & Postman, 1947; Coady, 2006; Difonzo & Bordia, 2007). Although rumors lack official verification, they can significantly influence our society by shaping public understandings and opinions. As a result, many examples can be found throughout history where the transmission of rumors played detrimental roles to "careers, relationships, policies, public officials, democracy and sometimes even peace itself" (Sunstein, 2014, p. 1). With the expansion of digital technologies, the detrimental impact of rumor transmission is escalating worldwide, particularly in overpopulated countries like Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Since many people live here within a small geographical boundary, relaying information to others is much easier for them. Additionally, a large number of people in Bangladesh use internet-based social media platforms, which have intensified this connectivity and expanded the epistemic networks beyond national borders. Such an expansion of the epistemic networks paves the way to influence a vast number of people by posting and sharing opinions or information on social media platforms. Additionally, due to the scarcity of reliable sources of information, many people, especially in rural areas, rely on social media to stay informed about what is happening outside. All of these factors have prepared a fertile seedbed for the origin and transmission of rumors.

Many academic studies have been conducted on rumors across different branches of knowledge, including Psychology, Philosophy, and Social Sciences. However, most theories about the transmission of rumors have been dominated by the Western psychological and epistemological framework. Although the existing theories contain valuable insights about rumor, the application of these theories without considering the sociocultural context of South Asian countries such as Bangladesh may catalyze epistemic colonialism (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mignolo, 2009). In the existing literature, exploration of the transmission of rumors in non-Western contexts through the lens of philosophy remains underdeveloped. This paper aims to fill part of the gap by exploring the transmission of rumors from a philosophical perspective in the context of Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY:

This research is conceptual research, which focuses on theoretical inquiry, analytical reflection, and the strategic use of qualitative case studies. It conducts a comprehensive literature review and conceptual analysis to understand philosophical and scholarly reflections on rumor. In addition, this study employs illustrative case studies to understand the dynamics of rumor transmission in the context of Bangladesh.

It is worth mentioning that these case studies are not empirical investigations in the traditional sense; instead, they serve as analytical tools that demonstrate how philosophical context can be applied to real-world contexts. The case studies are constructed through interpretive analysis of well-documented public events involving the spread of rumors. The material used, such as newspaper archives, social media discourse, and scholarly commentary, is employed not as raw data but as textual sources for conceptual reflection. Through this dual approach, the study bridges abstract theory and practical context by testing the explanatory power of the conceptual frameworks and exploring their implications.
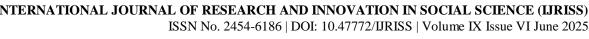
Theoretical Framework:

Rumors are usually defined as propositions or beliefs that are unverified or unjustified (Knapp, 1944; Allport & Postman, 1947; Buckner, 1965; Shibutani, 1966; Difonzo & Bordia, 2007). Although in some cases, rumors appear to have a justificatory base, their supposed justificatory base may still be weak (Coady, 2006). Though rumors lack a convincing justificatory base, they can travel a long distance. This characteristic distinguishes rumors from a similar but distinct phenomenon of gossip. While the circulation of gossip usually remains restricted within a close circle or small group of people, rumors tend to spread among a large number of people beyond any boundaries (Coady, 2006). This characteristic of rumors has been dramatically facilitated by the expansion of our epistemic networks after the emergence of the information and communication technology (ICT).

Additionally, the role of informal or casual talks (commonly known as *gup*) in engendering and transmitting rumors is worth mentioning to understand the dynamic of the transmission of rumors in the context of Bangladesh. In many cases, informal or casual conversations among the general public contain storytelling and speculative discussions. Such talks play a crucial role in interpersonal communication and communal meaning-making in Bangladeshi societies, particularly in rural areas. In many cases, such casual talks contain unverified information and interpretive storytelling, which makes them a fertile seedbed for the transmission of false rumors.

During the transmissions, rumors usually get distorted and become shorter in successive versions (Allport & Postman, 1947). As a result, rumors earn a bad reputation for being unreliable. Despite this, it is, in fact, true that not every rumor is false; there are true rumors as well (Mercier, 2020; Pound & Zeckhauser, 1990). However, it is too difficult to distinguish true rumors from false rumors during their transmission, since both true and false rumors often lack satisfactory justification. Now the question is, how do rumors spread and why do people accept and transmit rumors despite their bad reputations?

In some classical studies, researchers assumed that rumors spread in a linear fashion (Allport & Postman, 1947), where the transmitters of rumors act like repeaters who relay a rumor to the next person but never receive it back. This view has been criticized (Miller, 2005; Gelfert, 2014; Coady, 2012) since it ignores the social context of rumors (Miller, 2005). Rumors can progress linearly in tightly controlled laboratory conditions. However, this recipe does not work in real-life scenarios. In a typical social setup, people are closely connected with each other with different types of epistemic networks (Bala & Goyal, 1998; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019). Moreover, the invention of digital technologies has dramatically intensified this connectivity. As a result, when someone transmits a rumor to other members of a society, it can travel back to its original source or any previous transmitters. Such a circular transmission can potentially minimize the risk of losing the content of a rumor (Coady, 2012). However, it does not guarantee the reliability of any particular rumor. Rather, the unprecedented expansion of our social epistemic networks makes it possible for rumors to travel at unimaginable speeds to an inconceivable number of people. Besides, there are other factors, such as prior convictions, conformity cascades, informational cascades, reputational cascades, pre-existing biases,

group polarization, scoring social points, personal anxiety, and so on, that ignite and facilitate the spread of rumors (Rosnow, 1991; Sunstein, 2014; Mercier, 2020).

Transmission of rumors in Bangladesh:

Over the past few decades, the transmission of rumors has become a frequent phenomenon in Bangladesh. Various factors, including political instability, superstitions, lack of awareness, and cognitive biases, have created a fertile environment for the proliferation of rumors. For instance, political rumors often break out here throughout the year, which plays an influential role in shaping public opinion about different political parties. Apart from politics, religious and ethnic factors also play a significant role in engendering and transmitting rumors. As a result, evidence of rumors about ethnic conspiracy and religious disrespect is available here. Such rumors have tremendous power to escalate real-world conflicts and riots. Besides the widespread use of mobile phones, easy access to the internet and social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and so on has accelerated the spread of rumors.

Case studies:

Case study 1: Rumor of child sacrifice for the construction of the Padma Bridge

In 2019, several people were reported to have been beaten to death in Bangladesh. Such horrible incidents happened due to a widely circulated false rumor. The rumor claimed that human sacrifice (particularly the beheading of children) is needed to complete the construction of the Padma multipurpose bridge (BBC, 2019; The Daily Star, 2019). The rumor was primarily circulated via social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube and successfully attracted vast numbers of Bangladeshi civilians, particularly the rural people who usually have less access to substantial information.
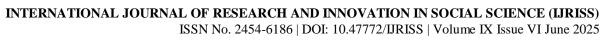
The propagators of this rumor used various means to circulate it, including an edited image depicting a pillar of the bridge, shaded by blood, and a demon face saying, 'Padma bridge needs blood'. That image went viral instantly. Some other Facebook post also went viral saying a young man was caught carrying head of a child in Netrokona (ABC News, 2019), some other people posted to warn civilians not to walk alone since the situation of the country becomes worse as the Padma Bridge seeks human heads (AFP Fact Check, 2019). Circulation of these rumors created fear and anxiety among the common people, which led them to flog several people to death due to the suspicion of being child kidnappers.

In response, the authority immediately shut down at least 60 Facebook pages, 25 YouTube channels, and 10 websites, due to the spreading of the rumor (BBC, 2019). Besides, they investigated the incidents of flogging people to death due to the suspicion of child abductions and found that none of the victims were guilty.

A similar rumor circulated in 2011 as well (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). At that time, Razib Hossain, a resident of Durgapur upazila in Rajshahi, posted a Facebook status claiming that 41 teams had been assigned to collect human heads as per the instruction of the prime minister, as the construction of the Padma Bridge required 100,000 human heads. He also mentioned that women and children were the primary targets of the killers. His post went viral soon and created fear and panic. In response, the authority arrested the convict, and he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment.

Case study 2: Ramu incident

In 2012, a status of a fake Facebook ID tagged with a Buddhist person, Uttam Barua, ignited violent anger, which led to a communal attack on the Buddhist community of Ramu, Cox's Bazar (Sarkar, 2022; Islam et al, 2023). The Facebook post contained an image of dishonoring the holy Quran, which hurts the sentiments of many civilians. However, investigations found that the Facebook ID may have been hacked to prepare the plot for the attack (Sarkar, 2022). The rumor spread quickly through word of mouth, text messaging, and further sharing on online platforms.

In response to that rumor, a mob comprised of around 25000 people set fire to Buddhist houses and temples on September 29, 2012 (ABC News, 2012). The violence continued till the next morning and spread to Teknaf, Ukhia, and Cox's Bazar Sadar Upazila (Islam et al., 2023). Though the violence began with the Facebook post, analysts have suspected that the real reason for it may be rooted somewhere else to satisfy politically motivated agendas (Islam et al., 2023). Few other researchers have addressed different factors, such as the role of digital technologies and media that are liable for fueling this violence (Rashid & Islam, 2013; Minar & Naher, 2018; Al-Zaman, 2019). Further investigation of this incident found that Barua neither posted nor was aware of the Facebook status (Islam et al., 2023). That means people reacted to the status without checking or verifying the fact.

In response, the Bangladeshi government unequivocally condemned the incident. Around 18 cases were filed, and several accused were arrested. However, many of them were released on bail, and it became hard to complete the trial since the witnesses showed reluctance to testify against the accused. At the same time, the victims showed little interest in continuing since the government built new houses and pagodas for them (Sarkar, 2022).

Case study 3: COVID-related rumors

In 2019, COVID-19 emerged with serious threats to public health. Besides, it brought many challenges to our informational ecosystems. At that time, Bangladesh observed the outbreak of numerous rumors about the coronavirus and its potential cures. Those rumors created serious confusion about the treatment of COVID-19.

A rumor at the time claimed that herbal remedies such as Thankuni (Centella Asiatica) leaves, Blackberries, and Garlic could prevent COVID-19 (Rumor Scanner, 2020; Al-Zaman, 2021). Another rumor claimed that drinking from a specific tubewell can cure many diseases, including COVID-19 (Bangla Tribune, 2020). Many people at that time also accepted and transmitted another rumor about the selective nature of the disease, which claimed that COVID-19 is a curse for non-believers. As a result, people with true faith will not be affected by it. Such a belief prohibited them from taking appropriate precautions against the disease. Another rumor at that time reported the connection of 5G technology with COVID-19. That rumor accused 5G technology of being a transmitter of coronavirus. This rumor also caused fear and confusion. Transmission of another rumor created serious obstacles to the vaccine campaign. A religious leader at that time stated that the corona vaccine contains microchips that can be used for surveillance purposes. Since religious leaders are followed and trusted by a large number of people, the rumor spread very fast. It affected people's observation of the vaccine and created serious confusion and hesitancy in using it (DW, 2021).

Philosophical Analysis of case studies:

In the aforementioned case studies, it is evident that a large number of people in Bangladesh have the tendency to believe information without verifying its truth value. It reveals the deficiency of digital literacy among civilians, which refers to the ability to access, understand, manage, communicate, integrate, create, and evaluate information safely and appropriately through digital technologies (Buchan et al., 2024; Law et al., 2018). Philosophers provide theories such as correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories to test the truth or falsity of specific propositions or beliefs. Among these theories, the correspondence theories of truth state that a proposition is true if it corresponds with reality (Russell, 2012). For the first case, no empirical data corresponds with the claim of sacrificing a child for the construction of a bridge. Still, lots of people accepted and transmitted the rumor. According to the coherence theory, a proposition can be true if it coheres with already established facts. Beheading and sacrificing humans do not cohere with established facts of construction engineering. The pragmatic theory of truth claims that a proposition is true if it satisfies our practical needs. Eating the leaves of Thankuni or garlic does not have any proven connection to curing or preventing COVID-19. However, many people accepted these rumors. All of these incidents unveil a bitter truth of how easily a false proposition can be accepted as true without critical analysis and investigation.

The acceptance and transmission of such rumors demonstrates the failure of the epistemic responsibilities of epistemic agents, since believing anything without sufficient evidence is considered a wrong action (Clifford, 1999). In the case of the Padma Bridge rumor, mere repetition and the presence of emotional content in the

story override the duty of verification. As a result, belief in the need for human sacrifice to complete the construction was accepted by many without any scrutiny. In the case of the Ramu incident, the mobs acted violently based on a Facebook post which is neither investigated nor confirmed. Both of these incidents represent epistemological and ethical malfunction through accepting a belief without justification and allowing such a belief to justify acts of violence.

Besides, acceptance of these rumors indicates the deficiency of dispositions such as intellectual caution, intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and so on that help us in fostering the cognitive excellences of human beings. These dispositions are known as epistemic virtues (Turri et al., 2021), which prepare epistemic agents to be vigilant and cautious before believing in any proposition; to reject false information even if it satisfies their needs, and not to accept and share false claims.

The aforementioned case studies also testify to the presence of the incident of testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when the credibility of a speaker is unjustly deflated due to the presence of prejudices (Fricker, 2007). In the third case study, a Buddhist man named Uttam Barua was falsely associated with a blasphemous Facebook post. His testimony was disbelieved without evidence. As a result, he and the community he belongs to suffered from violence. This incident is a clear instance of testimonial injustice where the credibility of a person from a minority group was denied due to preexisting biases.

All of these rumors were more likely to be transmitted in a circular fashion since most of them were transmitted on digital social media platforms. On any social media platform, people are intensely connected with each other. Such connectedness paves the way for any rumor to be repeated many times to a particular epistemic agent. Such repetition can engender conformity biases and allure people to believe in rumors, even if they are as ridiculous as those stated in the first and third case studies.

RECOMMENDATION:

In the aforementioned case studies, it has been observed that, in almost every instance, the transmission of false rumors is intertwined with deep epistemic and moral issues, as well as technological and regulatory issues. As a result, to resist the transmission of false rumors in Bangladesh, proper measures should be taken to address all of these issues. In order to do so, this study proposes the following recommendations to mitigate the adverse impact of rumors by enhancing individual capabilities, promoting institutional responsibilities, and developing sustainable digital infrastructure.

First of all, it is crucial to motivate people to cultivate intellectual virtues such as epistemic humility, open-mindedness, critical thinking, intellectual courage, and so on. These virtues help build the foundation of good epistemic practices and help epistemic agents resist the temptation to believe or transmit unsupported claims. In order to motivate people to cultivate these virtues, lessons on critical thinking should be integrated into the national curriculum, especially in secondary and higher secondary education. Such lessons should include instruction on recognizing cognitive biases, logical reasoning, and evidence evaluation.

It is evident that digital platforms played a significant role in spreading rumors and motivating epistemic agents to believe in the rumors in every incident mentioned in the case studies. This indicates the necessity of promoting digital literacy. In order to do so, it is necessary to conduct national digital literacy campaigns in order to teach people how to verify information, identify misinformation, and use digital platforms responsibly.

The scarcity of reliable sources of information, especially in crisis moments, motivates people to rely on gossip, informal or casual talks, and rumors, which facilitates the transmission of rumors. In order to block this pipeline of rumors, it is necessary to develop a centralized and accessible public information portal that will publish and promote authentic information.

Moreover, digital platforms, particularly social media, can potentially create environments that facilitate the spread of false rumors. Such an environment can allure epistemic agents to misuse digital platforms. In order to prevent this, governments should adopt policies and guidelines that will help to hold social media

companies legally and ethically accountable if they promote environments that facilitate the transmission of false rumors. Finally, an efficient rumor monitoring cell should be formed, which should be equipped with modern technologies capable of rapid detection and removal of false rumors.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the philosophical dimensions of the transmission of rumors with a particular focus on the case studies of Bangladesh. It shows how accepting and endorsing rumors without sufficient justification can harm the social, moral, and epistemic aspects of our lives. Though rumors lack a sufficient justificatory base, they can run fast since many people accept, endorse, and transmit them to others without verifying the facts. The case studies demonstrate how dangerously this attitude can affect our society. In order to mitigate this adverse impact, practical measures should be taken, including promoting intellectual virtues, integrating digital ethics into education, enhancing digital literacy, strengthening digital infrastructure, and enforcing accountability among social media platforms.

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