

Rumor in public opinions study: Suggestion for an approach dealing with rumors in Vietnam today

Phan Tân

Dr., Institute of Social Sciences Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences;

Email: phantanxh@gmail.com

Received 30 August 2015; published 25 December 2016

Abstract: *Public opinion and rumor are indispensable socio-psychological phenomenon in life today. However, unlike public opinion, rumor is rarely systematically mentioned and studied as academic concerns. In fact, there have been damages arising from rumors in many countries and Vietnam is not an exception. A critical requirement of public opinion study in Vietnam today is to research and differentiate the two above-mentioned concepts aiming at healthy social attitudes and eradication of false rumors resulting in destabilization.*

Keywords: Public opinion, Rumor, Media, Vietnam.

Introduction

In our society these days, the information boom with full support of media tools have set out a series of questions as follows: Is the information real or not? Is it accurate enough or not?...

Some initial information about an event or social issue is guaranteed accurate, real and drawn public interest (related to benefits, values of social groups) that creates *public opinion*; There is also initial information, which is unverified whether it is real or not, spreads and creates other extended discussions (with more or less

details). We still consider those as *rumor*. Hence, both public opinion and rumor come from initial information about an unreal and/or real event or social issue. Thus, on studying public opinion, it is necessary to study rumor.

Then what is public opinion? What is rumor? When each information is transmitted or perceived, how to differentiate if it is public opinion or rumor? This article will analyze characteristics of rumor in comparison with public opinion, thereby propose behavioral strategies for dealing with rumor in Vietnam today.

1. Public opinion and rumor

Before differentiating specific characteristics of public opinion and rumor, a certain fundamental issues in the views and perceptions on public opinion and rumor shall be summarized as follows:

1. Public opinion

There have been many definitions of public opinion that come from different views and approaches. Even at international-level conferences, there has been the view that “there is no such thing as public opinion” (R.C. Binkley, 1928: 390)^(*).

At a certain extent of study on public opinion, the author of this article proposes the following definition:

“Public opinion is a complex of discussions, reflections, assessments, recommendations, claims and solutions of social groups on occurred social issues related to benefits and values of interest” (Phan Tân, 2014: 63).

For this definition, we can understand as follows:

(*) Public opinion was ably set forth but it was unable to come to a definite conclusion. Some members of the Conference believed that there is no such thing as public opinion. Others believed in its existence but doubted their ability to define it with sufficient precision for scientific purposes. Others again, more sanguine or perhaps more credulous, believed that the term could be defined, but were of different minds concerning the kind of definition that should be adopted. (Robert C. Binkley (1928), “The Concept of Public Opinion in the Social Sciences”, *Social Forces*, Vol.6, No. 3, pp. 389-396. At The Round Table Conference on the Science of Politics in Chicago (August 12, 1924)).

1) Public opinion is a *complex* of opinions interacting with each other through *discussion* to show perceptions, feelings and will of social groups. The exchanged opinions from person to person aggregate into a common opinion; individual becomes “bearer of public opinion”.

2) Public opinion may only be *assessments, judgments or recommendations*, or making *claims, solutions*. When opinion only assesses, judges without giving recommendations, claims or solutions, the process of public opinion remains unfilled.

3) Public opinion could be aggregated from different, even conflicting views, creating consistent and inconsistent flows.

4) Public opinion could be opinion of the majority or minority. Such opinion is discussed and agreed by a group of people on the basis of benefits and/or values of their interest.

5) Only issues, events, social phenomenon related to *benefits* of many people’s interest can have the ability to create public opinion (*benefit* is the basis for emerging discussions).

6) The values and norms are the basis which public opinion targets at

2. Rumor

To date, there are relatively few in-depth studies on rumor. The definition of rumor by Peterson and Gist (1951: 159) is regarded as typical and is often referred in studies of public opinion, that is: “Rumor, in general usage, refers to an unverified account or explanation of events, circula-

ting from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue of public concern”.

Another definition is also cited in many related articles: Rumor is a piece of unverified information of uncertain origin and of public concern informally spread from person to person by word of mouth.

Through our collected articles and prior researches, rumor can be interpreted as follows:

- A social setting conducive to rumor occurs when a public is interested and concerned about a past or anticipated event, when authoritative information and explanation are lacking.

- Rumor is initially formed without verification or recognition through customary channels; its initial transmission mechanism is by word of mouth, unofficial social networking websites and it is also discussed informally when the interest of individuals tends to be intensified. The public of the rumor may be extended to include persons who originally were not interested in as they move from one discussion group to another, and rumor is often supported by citing supposedly authoritative sources.

- If there is a problematic situation that attracts the interest of public but lacks of reliable, authoritative, verified explanation, then unverified, inauthoritative and somehow “half believable” explanation will be the basis for rumor to occur (Lê Văn Hảo, 2012).

- Rumor basically results from distortion in perception and in *unilateral* verbal communication. Thus, there is no change occurring during informal discussion. Individuals transmit rumor to a succession of persons or groups. Obviously transmitter cannot communicate a different version of the rumor but it is embroidered like snowball when circulating from person to person. It is not due to the faulty memory of the transmitter but the expression of individual and public expectations, fears, anxieties, hostilities and aspirations. Rumor development and transmission involve interpretation, discussion, speculation and creative imagination.

- The distortion of rumor may be explained as follows: a person, in the role of transmitter, is likely to have more personal interest in a rumor than he had in the role of receiver. The prestige-position of the transmitter is more secure if the story can be made to sound authentic. The transmitter is sufficiently motivated to forget details that make the story dubious, to emphasize details that make it plausible, and to introduce new corroborating details.

- During verbal transmission, some details of the rumor may be reduced but others are exaggerated. In many cases, the rumor transmitter even uses media legally to dupe gullible people. When the rumor is “authorized” by the press, it will become a “bomb” with huge destructive strength under the boundless power of the mass media.

- Generally, among rumors, there are unverified and verified, the others can be

both: Many details are false but the addressed issue is true (Lê Văn Hảo, 2012). Even when the rumor is completely false, it still contains a kind of “truth” because it shows us something is happening and requires treating.

- Rumor relates to most of the fields such as politics, finance, crime, social order, market, and art... Rumor objects tend to be affectively evocative - fascinating, weird, bizarre... Hence, rumor is more emotional than other publics. Crow behavior and acts upon crow behavior can easily occur immediately and intensely. When the public reacts affectively to an issue, speculation and imagination are evoked. Rumor reflects a kind of social unrest.

- Negative rumors are more likely to be disseminated than positive rumors. The more well-known the individual and group or “the man of public”, the easier it is for them to be the subject of the rumor. Most of the rumors are “destructive” rather than “constructive”. Rumor can cause an enterprise to go bankrupt; it can also sink reputation of an individual.

- Anonymous crowd is the subject of rumor; each person in turn can become a news and information processor and generator in some way like “many people said that”. Because it is anonymous so it is very difficult to point out the person who is responsible for his transmitted information.

3. Distinguishing rumor and public opinion and their relationship

- Firstly, *public opinion and rumor are similar* because they are both socio-

psychological phenomenon, the distinctive mental, psychological structure for certain groups. Regarding to mechanism, public opinion and rumor are both quickly spread and easily distorted. Personal and social needs and interests have strong influence on rumor and public opinion.

- There is a *solid mutually inclusive and exclusive relationship between public opinion and rumor*. Rumor can lead to public opinion or not (depending on the object-reality - social events, issues mentioned are real or not, executable or not?). For example, it is said gasoline price will be adjusted. If this is not real, it will be just rumor, the price remains unchanged, and there will be obviously no public opinion about high or low gasoline price (since the price stays the same). The rumor then will be eliminated or become a lesson. However, if the gasoline price is adjusted (truly accurate news), there will inevitably be opinion about gasoline fluctuating price later...

- *Rumor may emanate prior to public opinion*. For example, before the news about increasing gasoline price, people are rush to buy gasoline... That is the effect of rumor. When gasoline price is officially notified and specifically listed, no one will rush to do so. Then, there will be comments such as: gasoline price is higher than in the past, gasoline price in America or China is lower than in Vietnam... They are opinions.

Rumor and public opinion can be differentiated via comparison (see Table 1).

	Rumor	Public opinion
Origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From real or unreal event - Derived from other people (<i>I heard from this/that person...</i>) - Appear when information is insufficient (or excessive) - Unverified origin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From real event - Derived from the addresser/speaker himself (<i>as I know... or, in my opinion...</i>)
Address	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unverified address 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Able to identify subject, object, form of expression and its audience
Formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secret, unofficial way - Individual opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unofficial way and official way - Can be as “anonymous” due to fear of punishment - Through debates, comment differences
Transmission channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From person to person by word of mouth - Unofficial websites, sometimes mass media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mass media
Intensity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intensity = attractiveness + indeterminacy - Primarily based on subjective feelings so highly spontaneous, viral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intensity = comment differences + development of individual or group opinions
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal purpose - often distorted by subjectivity of transmitter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For mutual interest
Wide/narrow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce details or exaggerate -> viral - The farther it spreads, the more variations it has due to continuous elaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accurate information -> viral - Initially, it is often scattered, then, through exchange, debate, consistency often increases
Problematicity - Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No problematicity or false problematicity - Not able to figure out real solution in terms of information, cognition and action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expose what is happening, causing which reaction, how to solve from the perspective of subject
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “False” (despite some rumors can be somewhat true) - “Ambiguous”, “vague” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Truly reflect thoughts, feelings, attitudes of subject
Essential components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Subjective feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intellect (both emotions and willpower)
Relations with people's intellectual standard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primitive level often leads to rumor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High levels often lead to public opinion

Table 1: Comparison between rumor and public opinion

2. Typical recent rumors in Vietnam

Admittedly, people now are shaken with many mixed information sources and rumors with unverified origins. Rumors are generated mostly in the fields such as politics, finance, production, artistdom... and they have left considerable negative impacts.

- *Financial market* often has rumors about financial capacity of companies, mergers, bankruptcy, company leaders are arrested or disappear... Such rumors cause panic and disorder on stock markets. The typical rumors can be listed as follows:

On 4/10/2003, there was a rumor that “Phạm Văn Thiệt - General Director of ACB abused company funds, embezzled and fled and then was arrested and jailed” (Hàn Phi, 2011). This rumor was transmitted by word of mouth and spread as quickly as a epidemic disease. Many bank customers flocked at the head office and some branches of ACB in Hochiminh City to withdraw money, making ACB facing serious “embezzlement”. State Bank Governor at that time, Mr. Lê Đức Thúy, had to fly immediately from Hanoi to Hochiminh City to publicly dismiss the rumor and stabilize the situation.

On 8/3/2007, there was a rumor that “Vincom’s CEO Mai Hương Nội had run away with huge amount of money”. This rumor was transmitted from person to person by word of mouth. Consequently, the company’s OTC stocks “were priced at 186,000 VND/share but the lowest bid price dropped to only 156,000 VND” (Hạnh Ngân, 2007).

On 02/12/2009, the public was stirred by the information that Vietnam was going to issue 1,000,000VND face value note and would tighten the monetary policy, meanwhile, it was stunned with the rumor that Vietnam would carry out currency redenomination despite money market did not have much disturbance. A head of a department belongs to State Bank had dismissed the false information but “the financial, banking markets were in chaos, interbank interest rate soared up, stock prices dropped dramatically” (Hàn Phi, 2011).

Around beginning of 2012, there was a rumor in Quảng Trị province that Carlsberg Group (Denmark) had sold Hue Brewery Ltd. and the brand HUDA to a Chinese partner. This rumor had “affected greatly the reputation of Hue Brewery and also fomented confusion among the public”, “production in Quảng Trị’s market dropped more than 70%” (Quang Liêm, 2012).

The rumor emerged on 21/02/2013 that BIDV Chairman of Board of Directors – Mr. Trần Bắc Hà was arrested, making the stock market plunged most sharply (over 18 points) in the last 6 months. Investors rushed to sell out. There were also many concerns on the gold market, foreign currency market... (Đặng Bình - Nguyễn Phú, 2013).

Information such as “eating grapefruit leads to cancer”, egg “is carcinogenic”, “fake eggs”... also appear frequently, causing people suspicious and they have to choose the safe way like “instead of grapefruits, eggs, we can eat other things and we cannot die”. In the end, “those

who eat (grapefruits, eggs) did not die, million of people who do not eat (grapefruits, eggs) did not die, but poultry farmers, grapefruit farmers are killed by such rumor” (Nguyễn Nhung, 2008).

There have been many times when information about increasing gasoline price cause people to panic and rush to hoard gasoline. For example, on 5/8/2008, news about “gasoline price increases at 25,000 VND/litre was transmitted from person to person by word of mouth, making many gas stations in major cities packed with people. Rumor spread like oil slick when people even made phone calls or sent text messages to inform each other” (Thanh Tùng - Gia Hi, 2008).

- *In the field of politics and ideologies*, especially prior to major political events such as National Assembly elections, Communist Party congresses at all levels, confidence vote casting at all levels..., false rumors related to staffing, lobbying, “hidden assets” of officials, leaders... will emerge. “False information increases rapidly on the Internet, in mobile phones and causes disturbances, doubts, fear in social life” (Tuyết Minh, 2014). For example, recently, there was news that Mr. NBT went to the US for treatment due to “being poisoned”. Despite of confirmation from those who were responsible that it was “distorted”, “lied”, “slandered”..., (Minh Anh, 2014), such rumor existed for a fairly long time, influencing people’s mind significantly, etc...

Recent rumors often emerge from the following reasons:

- *Rumors can be derived from a joke, ignorance or being set for bad intention, unfair competition.*

Market economy always requires fierce competitions for survival and development. While many businesses and individuals choose fair and legitimate approaches to compete such as investing in technology, design, product quality, building sustainable brand reputation etc. ..., some businesses with weak capacity or lack of business ethics choose unfair competition, use every trick to defeat opponents with news such as: product toxicity and contamination; company bankruptcy, merger; company leaderships embezzled, fled or were arrested...

- *Some anti-government forces with the intent to create social unrest by false rumors.*

Organizations or individuals deliberately exploit “relationships” be seen as “conflicting” among the leaders; while exploit the existing weaknesses of economical and social management to create instability to against the regime.

- *Request for information transparency and publicity has not been satisfied.*

In fact, in many instances, there are correct public opinions about social events, however, people do not get such official information. For example, the case of Thanh Hương perfume, the collapse of series of credit cooperatives and sudden currency redenomination (1985) “disturbed the entire life of people” (Trần Hữu Quang, 2003: 40). Therefore, without a mechanism established for transparent,

public and prompt information from the authorities before the occurrence of any social events or issues, the public anxiety is hard to eradicate.

3. Proposed behavioral strategies for treating with rumors

Rumor with its own characteristics requires appropriate behavioral strategies. Some recommendations are proposed as follows:

- *Rumor controlling through the policy and legal system:* The Law on Access to Information should be soon promulgated by the State so both sides – authorities and citizens – have responsibilities for providing and sharing information, ensuring realization of people's right to approach information as stipulated by the constitution: "It should consider what information worthy to be defined as secret and on classifying the secret it should take in account what time to be declassified. And the more transparent the better the society will be" affirmed Vietnam Prime Minister (cited by *Vietnamnet*, December 25, 2013). Law on Access to Information should assert the right to approach information on the basis of the most generalized codification on agencies and organizations that are responsible for providing information, identifying accessible information (information to be published or widely disseminated, and information access upon request) and restricted information (information classified as state secrets, privacy, trade secrets) or to-be-accessible information (information in the process of investigation, prosecution and

adjudication; information in the process of inspection, examination, observation; information contained in records, documents being drafted). This law regulates on order, general procedures for access to information, the grounds for refusal of providing information that creates a legal basis for individuals, organizations to exercise their right of accessing to information. It regulates the responsibility to supervise and examine the implementation of the right of access to information.

As rumor emanates, authorities and public security force must investigate, trace back to the origin and the course of happening of the rumor; timely handle those who spread the rumor.

- *Rumor controlling by authorities and media:* The press and authorities related to the work of information, communication should regularly, promptly and accurately update viewpoints of the Communist Party and the State; should not provide vague news causing people puzzled, curious and easily misunderstood.

To prevent "rumor war", it is important that the authorities must promptly provide official statement of dismissal. The statement can be announced immediately through press releases, TV speeches rather than via "sluggish" official dispatch.

Information infrastructure should be developed; create websites to against rumor, open forums on the media with the participation of experts, authorities and even citizens.

In modern information technology management and development, authoritative managers can only reduce rather than block all fabricated information. It is important that official information must be proactive and highly convincing.

It should organize a network of collaborators, wide hotline network to promptly grasp public opinions and rumors as soon as they emanate, sending to the rumor control center to process, analyze and propose corresponding treating strategy.

- *Controlling by organizations, individuals who are directly damaged by rumor:* The subjects of rumor themselves must accept the fact that rumor “must happen”; Also should timely cooperate with management bodies, authorities to give formal statement to dismiss the rumor such as: holding press conferences, providing evidence to affirm that the rumor is false; straight publishing rumor on mass media, providing official information to people.

The nature of rumor is due to the lack of information, hence the best way to dismiss rumor is to ensure the information transparency. Organizations and individuals should promptly recover their images by concrete evidence to regain public confidence.

- *Controlling by public - rumor recipients:* It should be alert when facing “rumor storm”. When facing shocking information, each person has to be calm to find out, evaluate and assess information themselves or contact immediately with

official information channel for verification without being rumor-aped.

- *Rumor controlling by researchers:* Identifying the emanation and transmission of rumor as a process, researchers advise authorities on the states of rumors, including: there is a typical cycle of rumor or rumor is formed by a community with common interest in an issue or event; the emanation of rumor, the growing and “snowballing” of rumor; the die-out of rumor; and the reorganization of social attitudes and beliefs.

In rumor systematical investigation, researchers should address the issues such as social sectors, attitudes conveyed through rumor transmission, act and role of a person in rumor discussion group, and personality traits of rumor pro transmitters.

In conclusion, rumor and public opinion are social psychological phenomena, they occur when people’s interests and values are dominated or at risk of being dominated by the social events, issues. Besides, the need to communicate over modern media makes public opinion and rumor being spread very fast round. For information derived from real social events, issues that constitute public opinion, if we know how to grasp, orient positively, it will be very helpful for social management. However, for the information derived from unverified social events, issues, or it is just a rumor in the end, it is necessary to timely control and break off the false rumor to avoid damages to the society □

References

1. Minh Anh (2013), *Mr. Nguyễn Bá Thanh being poisoned is distorted information*, <http://www.doisongphapluat.com/xa-hoi/thong-tin-ong-nguyen-ba-thanh-bi-dau-doc-la-xuyen-tac-a77839.html>, updated on 6/01/2015.
2. Binkley, R.C. (1928), "The Concept of Public Opinion in the Social Sciences", *Social Forces*, Vol.6, No.3 (Mar.1928), pp. 389-396.
3. Đặng Bình - Nguyễn Phú (2013), *Entrepreneurs and rumor problem*, <http://baophapluat.vn/doanh-nghiep/doanh-nhan-va-van-nan-tin-don-148316.html>, updated on 4/9/2013.
4. Lê Văn Hảo (2012), *When rumor find us for shelter*, http://www.tamly.com.vn/home/?act=News-Detail-s-11-1645-Khi_tin_don_tim_ta_tru_ngu.html, updated on 23/10/2012.
5. Quang Liêm (2012), *Huda brewery facing fabricated rumor*, <http://baophapluat.vn/kinh-te/bia-huda-truoc-nhung-tin-don-bia-dat-94324.html>, updated on 17/6/2013.
6. Tuyết Minh (2014), *Struggling to prevent false information*, http://www.cadn.com.vn/news/75_126010_da-u-tranh-ngan-cha-n-nhu-ng-thong-tin-sai-tra-i.aspx
7. Hạnh Ngân (2007), *Vincom's CEO fled, a rumor with bad intention*, <http://www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/tong-gdnbspvincom-bo-tron-mot-tin-don-day-ac-y-77928.tpo>, updated on 11-03-2007.
8. Nguyễn Nhung (2008), *The danger of "do + business" sponging on... rumor*, <http://www.vinacorp.vn/news/hiem-hoa-lam-an-theo-tin-don/ct-278485>, updated on 28/3/2008.
9. Peterson, W.A.; N.P. Gist (1951), "Rumor and Public Opinion", *American Journal of Sociology*, September 1951, vol.57, No.2, 159-67 pp.
10. Hàn Phi (2011), *Rumors destabilizing Vietnamese market*, <http://kinhdoanh.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/vi-mo/nhung-tin-don-khuynh-dao-thi-truong-viet-nam-2726459.html>, updated on 22/02/2013.
11. Trần Hữu Quang (2003), "Analyzing a rumor", *Saigon Economic Times*, updated on 23/10/2003, pp. 40-41.
12. Phan Tân (2014), "Study on public opinion in Vietnam today by approaching value systems and core values", *Journal of Sociology*, 3(127)/2014, pp. 62-68.
13. Thanh Tùng - Gia Hi (2008), *Should spreading false rumor be treated as crime*, <http://phapluattp.vn/an-ninh-trat-tu/tung-tin-don-that-thiet-xuly-hinh-su-duoc-260195.html>, updated on 13/9/2008.