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Rumour, False Report and Propaganda

RUMOUR and gossip are nuisances and can become menaces to business, government and individuals. They poison relations between people and affect the well-being of society.

Rumour cuts across all boundaries of occupation and private life with a speed that is greater than that of any other human communication. Gossip, mostly directed against something or someone, does damage in business, family or community groups. Both cling to invention and deceit, and both, even though containing grains of truth, are malignant.

What can we do about it? In business life, in personal life, and in social life we need to puncture the lies in the gossip we hear. One mark of a rumour that makes it distinct from truth is that it carries with it no secure standard of evidence. The teller often seeks to protect his integrity by saying something like: "It is only rumour, but I heard . . ." Or he may say: "A man who ought to know says . . ."

Under some conditions gossip is a powerful tool for keeping society in order ethically and politically. We all dislike to be "talked about" because we cherish social approbation. In small communities, where everyone knows everyone else, gossip is effective in restraining anti-social behaviour.

Gossip, said Kimball Young in *Sociology*, is the voice of the herd, thundering in our ears, telling us that the goblins of ridicule, ostracism, and punishment will get us if we don't behave.

Having paid this tribute to gossip as a social force for good, we must admit that the rattling tongue that dissects dead scandals or whips up new ones to amuse companions is doing a great deal of damage.

Our culture seems to be saddled with gossip for good or bad. Someone said that perhaps we should hang all the gossips, only it might come to pass that there would be no one left to pull the rope. We can make sure that we refrain personally from taking part

in malicious or dangerous gossip and rumour, and that we kill by ridicule or exposure any that comes to our attention.

How does gossip start? It may arise from love of one's own pet ideas. When we take a slap at something we don't like, we experience an emotional release. Just as important, we give ourselves a chance to explain to ourselves and others why we feel as we do. On a lower level, our gossip may be accusing others of having done what we would like to do.

We may gossip merely to fill a gap in a tea party conversation, and then, as Lady Teazle said in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* "when I say an ill-natured thing, 'tis out of pure good humour."

It is easy to go on from that to enlarge one's activity. Flushed by success, the coiner of rumour becomes arrogant. The attention he receives turns his head. He mistakes his toy trumpet for the trombone of fame.

Rumour in business

There has been no great business executive un-plagued by the indiscreet talk of his assistants and workers. Only the common cold is a rival to rumour in the speed with which it spreads through a factory or an office, and the disturbance it causes.

Rumour about the personnel of a firm may result in loss of business, damaged reputations, physical illness, and destruction of morale. Rumours predicting misfortune to the business, to a department, or to a class of workers, are of this sort. Rumours that arise from wishful thinking — the so-called "pipe dream" rumours — can be nearly as deadly, because they build up workers' hopes in readiness for a let down.

The grapevine within an organization always deals with something affecting the employees or their families, but it may attack anyone from the president down to the wash-room attendant. If it starts from the personal insecurity of one man it may spread to take in everyone.

Whispering campaigns can be organized to slander a department head or an executive. The only answer found so far is quick and definite publication of the truth, stemming from an honest will to have understanding prevail. Use of bulletin boards, employee magazines, and meetings of supervisors may straighten out the distorted stories.

One big corporation tries to cope with this problem by keeping up to date a loose-leaf facts book, given to all employees. It tells about the company, the industry, employee relations, prices, profits and risk, the role of management, and how the company is financed.

It is not only among workers on the lower levels that gossip must be guarded against and met. Thoughtless talk by junior executives and department managers can cause trouble. The temptation to give the impression by hints and sly suggestion that he is "on the inside" has withered many a man's budding reputation.

Not much is needed to start a damaging rumour. Not even words are needed, but merely shruggings and hunchings of the shoulders.

The basis of a rumour may be an actuality. Someone sees or learns something that he thinks is of enough interest to communicate to others. He may supply fanciful embroidery. He may distort the facts. He may blend this incident with others of a similar kind.

All or nothing

A mulish way of thinking common to rumour-mongers and gossips is that of all or nothing, black or white. Gossip ordinarily leaves no room for grays. A teeny bit of badness demands wholesale condemnation. The "badness" may not be a breach of our moral code, but only a little deviation from the customs of the community or of the workshop.

Most propositions are both true and false, depending on time and place. The rumour about them may bear the same resemblance to truth as a broken mirror does to a whole one.

Dryden referred to distortion in this way: "Some truth there was, but dashed and brewed with lies to please the fools."

Prejudice is a fertile base for rumour. Our beliefs of today may have their roots in bigotry far in the past. Those we inherit may be added to by experiences in childhood or in our business years, and may become shackles preventing our free exploration of thought.

The man trying to think straight will keep this in mind when he comes up against a rumour. If there is ample evidence he may say he knows such-and-such; with less evidence he may have an opinion about such-and-such; but when evidence is almost or quite

absent he may not even venture a guess. It is a good thing, and not only in testing rumour, to know that you do not know.

Bias or prejudice may show itself in the loose or improper use of words. Much of the pain and misery in the world today can be laid to erroneous or wrongful use of words.

One cunningly chosen word may have more power than a thousand good deeds. Give a man a cleverly bad name and it may do him more harm than many sound arguments would do him good. Out of realization of this danger has grown our law of defamation.

Making up tales

People who manufacture false tales to push their own interests are likely to take advantage of feelings of fear. If the times are out of joint, if our familiar world is being touched by innovation, if workers are apprehensive about new taxes or new methods or changes in management, there is a ready-made occasion for the rumour-monger's effort. He may seize upon a "poison" word, or use a good word in a poisonous way. Consider how Marc Antony did just that in his speech, skilfully converting good words into poison to turn public feeling against Brutus, the "honourable" man.

Although our law, going back a thousand years to Magna Charta, insists that an accused person is innocent until he is proved guilty by evidence acceptable to judge and jury, we have in these days to guard against an outbreak of "guilt by association." All the rumour-monger needs to do under certain circumstances is to find a characteristic in the man he reviles that is the same as a characteristic in an acknowledged evil man.

An illustration used by Stuart Chase in *Power of Words* will make this clear. The *Economist* (London), listening in astonishment to the charges coming from investigating committees of the United States Congress in 1952, proceeded to apply their logic to Sir Winston Churchill. As a member of the Church of England, said the *Economist*, Churchill was automatically associated with an admitted fellow-traveller, the "Red" Dean of Canterbury. As a member of Parliament, Churchill for fifteen years shared the House of Commons with a card-carrying Communist, William Gallacher. As a member of the Big Three in World War II, Churchill sat at conference tables with Joseph Stalin. Therefore, according to the "guilt by association" method of judgment, Churchill must be a Communist.

To us, reading thoughtfully, this appears to be the height of absurdity—but, after all, is its reasoning very different from that behind many rumours in factory and office, in church and school, in community and home?

Propaganda

Some people lump propaganda together with scandal, rumour and gossip in a wholesale condemnation. Here we run into danger of "guilt by association". Undoubtedly propaganda is like planned rumour in that it is designed to influence the attitudes of people through the use of suggestion. But much education is of the same sort.

The evil in some propaganda is its failure to disclose the source of information. The most subtle element in the propaganda of the European dictators was their exploitation of the dummy so that we did not notice the ventriloquist's tricks.

Educational propaganda, openly avowed, making its appeal to reason, crediting the listener with some common sense, acknowledging the existence of fair play and justice — that sort of propaganda should not be put in the same basket with propaganda that appeals to envy, hatred, prejudice, and our baser instincts.

Propaganda is not subject matter, but the way subject matter is presented. It is, as they termed it during the late war, either "black" or "white" — hidden or open in its sponsorship.

A piece of rumour or gossip planted in a workshop or office to sap morale or confuse issues is "black" propaganda; a statement printed over the signature of a responsible person and posted for all to see is "white" propaganda.

It is not by chance that "black" propaganda is mostly of the "poison pen" sort, designed to spread hatred, while propaganda carried out openly is directed toward betterment, co-operation and friendship.

Propaganda by rumour is at its worst when it refrains from making outright statements and contents itself with colouring information. It whitens the saintly characters of some and blackens others. We shall find it worth while, if we seek not to fumble our human relationships, to compel a revelation of what is in the accuser's mind. The great condemnation of Pontius Pilate is not that he asked a question: "What is truth?" but that he did not compel an answer.

Printed rumour

Searching examination is just as necessary with printed matter as it is with spoken words. We do not need to beware only of what is printed in so-called "scandal sheets". We need to look for thoughtless or sly inclusion of opinion and bias in news reports and commentaries.

What is printed need not be untrue in order to convey a wrong thought or impression. The emphasis in display, in size of type, and in the use of words may

slant what is reported in favour of this or that party or against this or that action. Merely the tone of a headline may tend to assassinate a man's business, political or personal character.

Reporters and other writers have a difficult task. The reading public expects to be given a true report of an event, and the writers may in all honesty think they are providing this. But the reporters get their information from people who are sometimes eye-witnesses of the event, sometimes not. The only report of a crime available to the public may be written by a reporter who received it from a policeman who had it from a man who saw the event from a half block away. There is ample chance for rumour, embellishment and mistake to creep in.

The code of the American Society of Newspaper Editors declares "News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind". Even when this code is earnestly observed by writers, the reader is not excused from exercising reasonable care to detect bias, perhaps produced by leanings the writer does not know he has.

Readers would be helped in this weeding out if newspapers adopted the precaution of incorporating a warning when statements are unverified, or deductions unproved. The responsibility of the press is not alone to avoid libellous statements for which they might be held accountable at law, but to protect their readers from being misled by mere rumour, by unverified gossip, and by black propaganda.

Readers may protect themselves from many errors of thought by taking a simple precaution: look at the adjectives in any written news or comment. They can make of truth a false report. Are they laudatory? Are they disparaging? Do they add emphasis to a fact? Do they minimize an event? Is the general effect of a piece of writing to make you angry? Then score out the adjectives with your pencil and see if the article still has the same effect.

Office politics

The game of office politics makes use of rumour, gossip and false report in ugly and crude ways. The war for show and place, the shouldering of fellow workers out of the way, the underhand manoeuvring, the seizing of opportunities to give someone a verbal black eye: these go on, to a little or great extent, in every company, big or small.

One executive met the menace in an unusual way. He had on his desk as a paper-weight a statuette of the three little monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. When one of his junior executives or department managers got around in a conversation to something that seemed to be verging on office politics,

the executive picked up the paper-weight and toyed with it. He found it an effective way of stopping office politics in his office in a good-natured way.

Other sorts of rumour and false report need different treatment. Testing for factuality is still the sovereign way to attack suspicious statements.

We need to apply some creative thinking to our appreciation of what we hear. It is our chief working tool. What goes on here? Who is trying to get me to do what, and why? What would happen if I were to respond as he desires?

Some practical help is given us by Korzybski in *Science and Sanity*, quoted by Chase in *Power of Words*. He suggests warning signals to keep our thinking and our talking straight: (1) add "etc." to a statement to show that all the facts are not included; (2) use index numbers to remind us of differences between proper names — John¹ is not John²; (3) use dates, because objects and thoughts about them change from year to year; (4) use hyphens, to show that events are connected; (5) use quotation marks around abstract words and phrases as a warning to treat them with care.

Stopping rumour

To protect ourselves against being taken in by rumour and false report and black propaganda we do not need to develop into suspicious-minded people who look sourly upon the world. All that is suggested is that we take reasonable and intelligent measures to avoid being fooled.

It is one of the attributes of mankind that we can look at all sides of a question and consider how far the facts will support an opposite view. There is a significant fable about two knights who fought about the colour of a shield of which neither looked at more than one side. Each combatant, seeing clearly his own aspect of the question, has charged his opponent with stupidity or dishonesty in not seeing the same aspect of it, while each has lacked the candour or the curiosity to go over to his opponent's side and find out how it was that he saw things so differently.

This finding out what is on the other side of the shield is a necessary part of any effort to stop or counter false rumour. An article in the periodical *Industry* said that in the battle against false rumour there can be no offensive, only a defense. In business, this means telling workers what affects them, quickly, completely and unambiguously. You might install a rumour clinic as part of the personnel department, with an assignment to find out what rumours are being spread, find out the answers and make known the explanation. This could be an invaluable morale booster, but it will need to avoid generalities and descend to particulars.

The defense against rumour must be honest. When Gavin Douglas appealed to the Archbishop of Glasgow, in the early part of the 16th century, urging him to try to keep the peace, the Archbishop, striking his breast, protested on his conscience that his intentions were peaceable. Alas for him, the ringing sound of metal revealed the coat of mail he wore under his robes.

Avoiding rumour

As for our own part in spreading rumour, it is probably wise counsel to keep silent for the most part, or to speak only what is necessary, and in few words, when the conversation gets around to rumour-prone matters.

The young business man will prosper his promotion if he cultivates the habit of saying nothing for long periods at a time. He will remember that Tantalus was punished because, having been admitted to rub shoulders with the Greek gods at heaven's high feast, he failed to curb the intemperance of his tongue.

Small-talk seems to be necessary in our civilization. It may be made up of platitudes and a dash of witticism, but it should be flavoured with goodwill and generosity. What we are exercised about is the intrusion into it of harmful gossip and rumour. Under the noise made by this grown-up's rattle, much damage can be done by cunning people. An indiscreet phrase dropped in small-talk may be picked up and used to damage a budding career.

To an immature mind, silence may be a goad to indiscretion, but not to the thoughtful youth pursuing his way toward eminence in his business or profession. A clerk, James Simpson, who became chairman of Marshal Field and Company, smoked cigars so as to be sure he would keep his mouth shut; another man, given to talking often in conferences, propped against his water-glass a little card on which he had printed: "Keep quiet". James Rand, Jr., head of Remington Rand, said he did not believe it possible for a man to succeed in a big way who talked confidential company affairs even to his wife.

Let us not think for a minute that all the direful results belong to the victim. The loose talker sabotages his own integrity. Knowing his own unreliability he finds it hard to trust others. He misses many opportunities for true friendships, the stuff of which a happy life is woven.

Through unnumbered centuries of human experience there have been built up certain codes of conduct and standards of action. Those who practice these codes are believers in the Golden Rule and the square deal. Their conduct is consistent with their convictions.