The Rumor Mill or "How Rumors Evade the Grasp of Research"

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The Relevance of Rumor Research within Conceptual Design
Contemporary concepts of escape plans for regions, for example, those hit by a natural disaster, rely on quick dissemination of information and a mindful mix of media that includes more imprecise, emotional information like rumors. Who should be designing this communication and how? In 2008, an interdisciplinary research team at the Bern University of the Arts (HKB) launched the project "Gerüchteküche" ("rumor mill"), which brought unexpected results and led to numerous by-products. Why are communication designers interested in rumors in the first place? A closer look at the shift between concepts of graphic design and visual communication offers many topical links and demonstrates their relevance for our research question: How can communication designers design and steer rumor-based communication?

Graphic design is about facilitating access to visual content, for example, in images and text. It traditionally covers the sketch and execution of two-dimensional surfaces (posters, books, advertising, etc.). Graphic design can become part of the rumor mill by producing texts and images that might confirm an ongoing rumor, for example, in the "photographs" of the Loch Ness monster. It is important to separate this functionality of graphic design media from pure forgery. In this context graphic design serves as an entity of authority—a framework and channel. Because their professional means of production (like the apparatus of photography or the techniques of typography) have not been widely accessible, photography and the editorial design of books, newspapers, and magazines have gained trust over the centuries and considered to be stable media. Because of the image manipulation skills of new media,[1] graphic design plays a massive role in altering so-called documentary media, such as photographs, into images, which cannot be verified. "Cannot be verified" means that a picture does not have to match a specific reality. Since the media revolution in the late twentieth century and the emergence of electronic media, the concept of graphic design has receded into the background. In its place, the more general concepts of "visual communication" or "communication design" have become current.[2]

1   For example, like the early Instagram filters, which enabled photographs taken in 2014 to assume the appearance of photos from the 1970s.

2   See B. Schneider, *Design—Eine Einführung* [Design—An Introduction] (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2009).

Visual communication was proposed as a contemporary generic term for the whole sphere of the visual arts. It was intended to encompass both the producer and the recipient of the communication process. Visual communication facilitates access to visual content and includes time-based media such as film and any visually perceptible artifact that might function as a way to communicate visually. It may also apply to digital content in the form of a short piece of information (e.g., an e-mail), or it might apply to social media. It is a matter of not only images but also the visual appearance of text, which becomes a kind of image. Such texts are prone to manipulation because they follow each other rapidly and are difficult to trace, such as the e-mail setting off the rumor in 2008 that the British bank HSBO was in trouble. The result was HSBO's approximate 17 percent stock-price drop in a single day. This drop provided those circulating the rumor with an estimated $124,610,000 (£100 million) profit.[3]

Ultimately, a study of rumor is anchored within the overarching concept of communication design. This concept describes the visual design of communication processes. In the 1990s, the development of information technology (IT) and computers afforded communication design an increasing significance, and it is expected that this trend will only intensify in the course of the twenty-first century. Design Research at the Bern University of the Arts HKB uses the phrase "communication design," and this was chosen consciously—on one hand due to the definition of the concept, because it designates the visual and non-visual design of communication processes, and on the other hand because the research teams are formed in an interdisciplinary manner and approach their projects in collaboration.[4] The concept of communication design includes not only the design of images and texts but of all sorts of things, materials, and cultural matters, such as habits and rituals that can convey messages and thereby become "media." All communication in this framework is *designed.* The "below-the-line communication forms," in a more narrow sense—such as ambient media, guerrilla marketing, and buzz marketing—use of word-of-mouth tactics to spread the word about their communication goals as part of a mix of media.[5]

To summarize, design can be understood in the narrower sense of a discipline (as in graphic design, industrial design, etc.) or more broadly, with a greater range of possibilities.[6] We can observe that the broader definition, which is suitable above all in the context of design theory, is also increasingly used in those fields of work for which the narrower definition has normally been applied. The present project is a result of such an expanded understanding of the disciplines. Several methods and practices of communication design were used to explore, design, and disseminate

3   "Moderne Form von Bankraub" [Modern Forms of Bank Robbery], *NZZ am Sonntag,* April 23, 2008.

4   P. Svensson, "Interdisciplinary Design Research," in *Design Research—Methods and Perspectives,* edited by B. Laurel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 193–200.

5   There is a strong connection here to the way rumors are conveyed. Our research demonstrated that one basic criterion of how rumors are spread is that this happens by word of mouth. Rumors also include unconfirmed facts, and these are inherent to oral narratives.

6   For example, in the definition by Herbert Simon, who described design as every activity that changes one state into another desired state; H. A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969).

rumors as well as the research on rumors in this project. In what follows, continuative concepts are initially introduced to illuminate the role of communication design in the current project.

Ingredients from Communication Theory and Sociology
Before we could embark on "designing" and "steering," we considered sociological perspectives on how to define and classify rumors, on the conditions necessary for rumors to flourish, on their impending impact, and ultimately on how to influence their course. This was an attempt to grasp the intangibility of rumor.

During World War II in particular, there was much interest in the targeted use of rumors for subversive purposes. In modern, research-based approaches, greater attention is being paid to cultural changes in connoting "true or false," to the influence of the general information environment, and to the interface between trust and rumor.[7] The concept of rumor has been defined "a proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification" and "a specific (or topical) proposition of belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present."[8] Creating rumors is of theoretical interest because it can serve as a means of creating meaning in ambivalent, confused situations. It can also be of practical interest, since rumors may potentially be used to foment hostility, suspicion, and mistrust. The relevant research areas within sociological research are in this case as follows:

Classifying rumors: here, we differentiate between dread rumors (with assumed negative consequences), wish rumors (with positive consequences), and neutral rumors; the first group is transmitted more willingly.[9] Other typologies refer to the classification of rumors under conditions of organizational change and according to their conversational properties.[10]

The conditions for passing on or disseminating rumors: according to the "basic law of rumor,"[11] the extent of dissemination of a rumor depends on its subjective relevance multiplied by the extent of its uncertainty/ ambiguity. Further determining factors have been proven to be the credulity assigned to it and the affective investment in the rumor or its anxiety-inducing quality.[12]

The impact of rumors: here we find the above-mentioned historical examples for triggering and intensifying civil unrest and the consequences of catastrophes, and research examples on triggering fears of criminality and influencing

7   See P. Donovan, *How Idle Is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumour Research* (Zürich: Diogenes 54, 2007), 59–82; and G. A. Fine, *Rumour, Trust and Civil Society: Collective Memory and Cultures of Judgement* (Zürich: Diogenes 54, 2007), 5–18.

8   Quoted here as in R. Rosnow, J. L. Esposito, and L. Gibney, "Factors Influencing Rumor Spreading: Replication and Extension," *Language and Communication* 8 (1998): 29–42.

9   C. B. Fried and A. Maxwell, "Rape Rumors: The Effects of Reporting or Denying Rumors of Sexual Assaults on Campus," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 36, no. 11 (2006): 2766–84.

10 Regarding change-related rumors, see P. Bordia, E. Jones, D. Gallois, V. J. Callan, and N. DiFonzo, "Management Are Aliens! Rumors and Stress During Organizational Change," *Group and Organization Management* 31 (2006): 601–21. Furthermore, see B. Guerin and Y. Miyazaki, "Analyzing Rumors, Gossip, and Urban Legends through Their Conversational Properties," *Psychological Record* 56, no. 1 (2006): 23–33.

11 G. W. Allport and L. Postman, "An Analysis of Rumor," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10 (1947): 501–17, though it has been called into question by later research.

12 Rosnow et al., "Factors Influencing Rumor Spreading," 29–42 and M. V. Pezzo and J. W. Beckstead, "A Multilevel Analysis of Rumor Transmission: Effects of Anxiety and Belief in Two Field Experiments," *Basic and Applied Psychology* 28 (2006): 91–100.

one's feeling of security through rumor and its impact within a city.[13] Consequences on the organizational level are also addressed.[14]

Influencing rumors: this aspect is interesting from the perspective of design theory, and it was approached by investigating how to steer rumors through different forms of denial, such as in the example of an e-mail virus that was supposedly in circulation.[15]

The Study, Part 1: Stakeholders and Case Studies Method

Alongside this sociological attempt to make rumors more tangible and measurable, we explored relevant fields of practice. The question of how rumors and rumor-based communication forms might be used or repudiated in the fields of professional communication planning and security and crisis situations was analyzed by interviews with different professionals in the communication sector. Extensive conversations were held with stakeholders in the fields of journalism (a local journalist), development work (a development worker), the police (a media spokesperson), and public relations (an agency strategist). These were recorded and transcribed. We were keen to know how professional communication planning, security communication, and crisis communication are used in these professional fields. In what follows, we focus on the practical concepts of rumor recognition and the possibilities perceived for combating rumors in these different fields of practice.

Results

Rumor recognition: On May 12, 2008, more than 80,000 people died in an earthquake in the Chinese province of Sichuan. This raised the question of why an earthquake warning that circulated among the population four days earlier was officially deemed a rumor by the authorities. "But in the affected region … a warning had already circulated among the population on May 8 that there would be a 'serious earthquake' and that village inhabitants were supposedly advised 'to go into open country.' On May 8, the earthquake warning center of the provincial government published a note on its website that this was merely a 'rumour.' The website had already been deleted on Monday, shortly after the actual earthquake."[16] What is interesting about crisis communication here is that the official state authorities play a role in communicating rumors. The development worker we interviewed had already worked for the International Red Cross and remarked: "Often, rumors come from a protagonist such as the government in Baghdad." One conclusion derived from dealing with rumors in

13 Fried and Maxwell, "Rape Rumors," 2766-84 and M. Nejati, A. Asadian, and M. Zehtabi, "Rumors and Their Impacts within the City," *Technics Technologies Education Management* 5, no. 2 (2010): 354–59.

14 C. C. Kuo, K. Chang, S. Quinton, C.-Y. Lu, and I. Lee, "Gossip in the Workplace and the Implications for HR Management: A Study of Gossip and Its Relationship to Employee Cynicism," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 26, no. 18 (2015): 2288–307 and G. Michelson, A. van Iterson, and K. Waddington, "Gossip in Organizations: Contexts, Consequences, and Controversies," *Group & Organization Management* 35 (2010): 371–90.

15 P. Bordia, N. DiFonzo, R. Haines, and E. Chaseling, "Rumors Denials as Persuasive Messages: Effects of Personal Relevance, Source, and Message Characteristics," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35 (2005): 1301–31; P. Bordia, N. Di Fonzo, and C. A. Schulz, "Source Characteristics in Denying Rumors of Organizational Closure: Honesty Is the Best Policy," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 30, no. 11 (2000): 2309–21; Q. S. Wang and P. J. Song, "Is Positive Always Positive? The Effects of Precrisis Media Coverage on Rumor Refutation Effectiveness in Social Media," *Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce* 25, no. 1 (2015): 98–116.

16 *Historic Worldwide Earthquakes.* Liste historischer Erdbeben, nach Datum sortiert [List of Historical Earthquakes, sorted by Date], United States Geological Survey (accessed November 24, 2008). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erdbeben_in_Sichuan_2008 (accessed January 20, 2017).

the realm of crisis communication is that in this field in particular, such as in occupied Iraq in 2008, information often cannot be verified clearly, which means that even news put into circulation by state authorities can be rumors that serve a specific communications purpose and can be neither unequivocally confirmed nor denied. The development worker says: "For example, there were rumors in Iraq that people were traveling to and fro [from] between Ramadi and Basra. The government quickly spoke of many people returning, and tried thereby to make clear that the security situation had calmed down. In this connection, the return of refugees was a political issue, and you have to ask yourself who was served by this information." The journalist gave a similar answer when the interviewer asked, "In other words, when you're dealing with rumors, the first step is to go back to the source?" The journalist replied: "Yes, absolutely. . . . First, you always weigh everything up carefully and ask: to whom is a rumor useful, who could be interested in it? How important is it at all? Is it worth the effort? It is, as I said, sometimes very time-consuming, and then you go straight to the person affected." "Qui bono" ("to the benefit of whom?") is a strategic question used in journalism and crisis communication to determine the degree to which a piece of news is led by specific interests. We are not concerned with clear yes-or-no answers here, but about weighing up probabilities. To recognize rumors in professional communication planning, one employs one's own experience gained from consciously disseminating rumors. In this sense, the agency strategist, who is the planning director of a communication agency that is active worldwide, says:

> I think you recognize it. It has a lot to do with the person or the instance that transmits the rumor … and then you naturally recognize a rumor by the manner in which it comes across—at least I recognize it by its advertising means. I notice in my field whether a rumor has been disseminated professionally or not. Because I can see who it is that's saying something; I can see if it's a marketing means or whether it has anything to do with that, or perhaps I've already seen a reference to it on some poster or other.

The development worker displayed the caution that comes with his profession: "If I hear of something that I can't verify, I'm suspicious—in the case of information that I can't verify from A to Z but only from A to F." He relies on his own research to verify rumors: "We collect information. We ask people on the spot—these could be our own colleagues or people whom we trust. For example, we asked lorry drivers about the rumor that people were being held in

the customs building: Was it true that thousands of people were begging for water?" These inquiries have limitations because not all areas can be reached safely by development workers.

> For people involved in humanitarian assistance, it's getting increasingly difficult to verify rumors on the spot because their organizations want to protect employees from becoming "collateral damage" (through abduction or even death). In Iraq, you can't simply walk about because the risk of abduction is too great. It doesn't take long before a ransom of five to ten million francs is being demanded. So we are dependent on informers. Basically, skepticism plays an important role in recognizing and fighting rumors.

Rumors can be recognized independently of one's experience with communication styles and independent of the interests of those involved; they can be recognized by the form they take, for example, how they are formulated. This becomes evident in the interview with the police media spokesperson, who was asked how he recognizes a rumor: "If someone says: 'I've heard that …', then you know that this person hasn't heard it directly either, but via someone else. The rumor spreads quickly … it's something new. It's certainly also something that is topical and interesting, something where there's always an open question. And something for which my conversation partner can't give me a proper source." Furthermore, the media spokesperson says that the media differ in whether they disseminate rumors: "Mostly, regrettably, you can classify the media pretty well … you know which media will spread a rumor and perhaps even add to it." With "media," he means primarily the newspapers in their printed and online versions. In the interview, these media are named. Alongside this differentiation of media according to their reporting of rumors, there are specific topics that are "more liable to rumor," as the local journalist says: "everything to do with relationships, with sex in any case, about who does what with whom, about money, power, success and failure." Specific phrases can point to rumor-based communication, and the local journalist says that tabloid journalism often uses questions to spread rumors. This observation was also made by the media spokesperson of the police, as we can see from the foregoing quotation.

Strategies for Combating Rumors

For the local journalist, the appropriate strategy for combating rumors depends on the type of rumor. When it is a matter of a person-related rumor that is damaging to the person in question, he prefers this option: "Communicate openly and cleanly,

otherwise it will always resurface, I think." In the case of institutions and firms he also suggests going public. These means of correction and denial are used by the development worker, who mentions a further, self-critical component in combating rumor: "First make sure that we're not producing rumors ourselves. In a camp in Darfur, there was a rumor that a cholera epidemic had broken out there. In this case we questioned the doctors and found that it was a case of heavy diarrhea that can also lead to cholera. So we cleared up the matter and insisted that no one speak of cholera: 'I don't want anyone speaking of cholera.'" Here, what's important is: "If you talk of something, it very often becomes reality."

Furthermore, professional skepticism plays an "important role" in fighting rumors, according to the development worker. In the field of professional communication planning, however, the agency strategist says his expertise in spreading rumors plays a decisive role in combating them: "In the same way that you spread a rumor, you can also combat one by disseminating the opposite message in specific media. … I think that in publicity or public relations, and in the broadest sense in public affairs, the crucial instrument is to counteract the rumor by speaking to the masses. But if only a small target group is involved, I think that you can combat it just as effectively with counter-messages. If you've spread them, you can also combat them." The media spokesperson stresses the role of communication speed in combating rumors.

It is precisely in the sphere of crisis communication and security communication that there is only a brief time window between the event and it being reported. This is also a result, he says, of citizens notifying the local press first, before telling the authorities, because a "mobile phone reporter" gets a bonus. This is why the police's own communication officers try to depict the case from their viewpoint in an official media report as quickly as possible. The police spokesperson supports the hypothesis that the greater the time between the event and the press report, the greater the number of rumors: "Rumors also need a particular amount of time. If I inform people very quickly, then there are no rumors, or hardly any. They then haven't got any fertile ground in which to spread, because the facts are already out there. And as long as the facts aren't out there, people have enough information to start spreading diverse rumors. I'd even say that this is the decisive factor. The time involved in rumors emerging." Further means of fighting rumors, according to the police spokesperson, are transparency and active communication. Just like the statement of the development worker about how to fight rumors—that he doesn't want to be involved in propagating them himself—the police spokesperson says that open formulations in press reports can lead to speculation among the media: "I know that this is a

tricky point, and I'm very aware of it when writing, but I'm going to write it well enough for no questions to arise from it, and this is precisely something that they [the media] are going to ask about."

The Study, Part 2: Provoking Rumors and Studying Them "Live"? The Experiment Method

After gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, we went about investigating how and within what framework the research team might be able to approach these questions in a concrete, systematic manner. Sociological and sociopsychological investigations endeavor to attain a certain proximity to reality, but ultimately they restrict themselves to using current situations in which rumors have been in circulation at the time of the investigation or in which they confront interviewees with fictitious reports.

Thus in 1988, Rosnow et al. interviewed university students on a campus where an unsolved sex crime had just been committed. Two other researched rumors relating to "real-world settings" included the sudden death of a student from a case of meningitis and a sniper shooting in Washington.[17] Fried and Maxwell presented systematically varied, fictitious newspaper articles that either made rumors credible or denied them.[18]

It is not by chance that it is rare in the sociological literature or research practice to find a case of a researcher proactively starting a rumor (one might even call this its inception), then varying and tracking it. Ethical considerations and the possible "uncontrollability" of the rumor mean that boundaries have to be set. But it is precisely this challenge that was met head-on by the HKB team, and they chose a specific location in their university to be the place to bring a rumor of organizational change into circulation and track the subsequent reactions. In design research, design experiments have a long tradition and face a specific framework of their own practices.[19] The research team succeeded in creating the prerequisites for such a design rumor by making corresponding agreements within the framework of the organization. Just before the summer holidays in 2008, the rumor was spread throughout the university "in a targeted, fuzzy manner," by word of mouth and by e-mail, that a prominent member of university management was going to leave the institution. The rumor was spread by selected key persons. In this way, no one was able to verify the truth of the rumor. The permission of the person in question was sought and acquired. A denial strategy was ready just in case untruths began to be spread that were directly detrimental to the person in question. Various indicators and informal information proved that the rumor, as had been desired, spread like wildfire.

17   Pezzo and Beckstead, "A Multilevel Analysis of Rumor Transmission," 91–100.
18   Fried and Maxwell, "Rape Rumors," 2766–84.
19   H. Jenkins, K. Squire, and P. Tan, "You Can't Bring that Game to School," in *Design Research—Methods and Perspectives,* edited by B. Laurel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 244–52; N. Shedroff, "Research Methods for Designing Effective Experiences," in *Design Research—Methods and Perspectives,* edited by Brenda Laurel, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003),155–63.

With this background, on September 27, 2008, an "innocent" Internet survey was begun with the personnel of the HKB that investigated the dissemination of the rumor that had been launched and its determinants and aimed to examine the general rumor environment at the HKB. This eight-page questionnaire with thirty questions was administered using the survey tool 2ask, with anonymity guaranteed. It aimed to acquire a description of the modalities as to how the rumors in question were received and passed on and to investigate the credibility of denials and assumptions about who was behind the rumors.

Results

The central question was: "Have you recently, here at the university, learnt of any rumours that refer to the HKB, its management or its student body?" Just under half of those who were questioned answered "yes," and by no means was it mentioned that the rumor was intentionally spread by the research team. The rumor mill was running at high speed quite independently of this, and presented a colorful picture of rumors, such as the following examples:

- There's going to be no more construction work.
- Art in public spaces will be cut to save money at the HKB.
- Employee X used to be in a relationship with employee Y.
- The HR department will be moved to the Bern University of Applied Sciences.
- Number of students is shrinking.
- Too many students have failed their exams.
- All outside steps have to be removed again because of a conflict with the department for the preservation of historical monuments.
- The library is going to be moved.
- The departments of the HKB in the city of Biel will be closed down.
- All that stuff about the powerful position of XY at this university.
- Insecurity in the administration due to lots of personnel turnover.

In comparison to members of the administration and research assistants, rumors were barely registered by part-time lecturers, presumably because these were only rudimentarily bound into the university's communication structures, and the rumors were primarily passed on by word of mouth. Ultimately, roughly half of the "rumor confidantes" admitted that they feared negative consequences if the rumor proved to be true.

What was far more interesting than the content of the partial results—and it was not necessarily expected by the researchers—were the general reactions to the concept of "rumor" by members of the organization and to the very idea of asking them about it. It so happened that surveys on income and sexual activity are quite possibly far less sensitive than a request to name rumors in one's working environment. Despite the anonymity of the survey, the participation quota was remarkably low: of a total of 195 employees, after two e-mail reminders, only a third ($n = 63$) had answered at least the opening question by the time of the survey closing on November 11, 2008 (of whom 44 percent answered "yes"). Only thirty-six people responded to most questions, which represents a low response rate of just 18 percent. Of the twenty-eight people who knew of rumors at the HKB, only fifteen were prepared to give concrete details of them.

The attempt to achieve a visual localization of the rumors circulating and create a chart of these rumors was blocked. Along with the online survey, single-use disposable cameras were provided for people to photograph spots where rumors were deemed to be spread, and the means was provided to return these anonymously. But they were left practically unused or were used to make fun of the research project. These facts suggest that the topic of rumor is indeed a highly delicate matter to survey. Furthermore, despite the guarantee of anonymity and the original concealment of the procedure, the fact that it was an internal research team that had launched the survey also played a role. When asked who might be behind each rumor in question, only in two cases was "internal manipulation" suspected.

A further surprise came for the research team when the project took an unexpected turn after the rumor they had spread turned out to be *true*, and the person actually did leave the university several months later (following the participants' online survey debriefing). Accordingly, suspicions arose within the institution (= new rumors) that the rumor had been launched intentionally and that the people in the research project obviously already knew "more about the matter" much earlier though this was not the case. In the end, the research team members—as if in a kind of action research—were themselves confronted with all the positive and negative aspects of rumors and were drawn directly into the rumor dynamic. Within the research process, the unpredictability of the rumor, the affective investment in it, and its possible instrumentalization (as a follow-up rumor) became evident, but the initial research question regarding appropriate steering elements in the dynamic of rumors was once again placed at center stage.

From Theory and Research to Practice and Knowledge Transfer: "Recipes" for Steering Rumors in the Public Arena

The research team had learned its lesson, and when the chance offered itself afterward to contribute to a temporary exhibition on rumor at the Museum for Communication in Bern (2009–2010), the basic idea soon emerged of offering something dealing with strategies for steering and combating rumors based on the team's research experience and its initial basic research.

The team decided to pursue use of gamification strategies: At computer stations, exhibition visitors were able to interactively experience the rewards of how to properly deal with rumors (see Figure 1).

For the screen design, the objective was to design something eye-catching. The visitors had to be made aware of our game despite the wealth of other exhibits. The number of people who visited the Rumour Fighters at the exhibition confirmed that we had achieved our aim in full.

The design was inspired in formal terms (especially in its typography) by the world of text-based computer gaming. The illustrative application of a rumor in the form of a snake-like animal referred to a lithography by A. Paul Weber from 1943. Our design (typography, illustration, and coloring) was intended to exude a certain contemporary feel. The user interface for answering questions was oriented to current interface standards with regard to user prompting, user orientation, and user expectations. The five-minute "rumor fighter" training involved confronting the visitor with four cases in which he or she had to decide on how to react by giving answers to four sensitive questions. The opening text ran as follows, and at the close, each visitor was able to print out a diploma:

> How do we deal with rumours? Welcome to our 5-minute training to become a graduate Rumour Fighter! We shall see how you advise the French President, how you can help to avoid panic in the Egyptian population, how you deal with a foodstuff scandal and how not to lose your nerve during workplace rumours about your affair with the boss. In every case you have to decide how to react to four sensitive questions. You'll get points for this. According to how you fare, you can print out your diploma at the end as a "Super Rumour Fighter," a "Junior Rumour Fighter" or a "Baby Rumour Fighter."

When choosing the four scenarios, the following aspects were taken into consideration:

Fun potential: this is not necessarily connected to the living environment of the exhibition visitor but touches on the user's enjoyment of role play. They slip into the role of the rumor fighter and have to prove themselves in exciting situations.

Reference to reality: these are actual rumors that have really existed and the exercise draws on how one would deal and assess the rumor in concrete terms.

Attractiveness: the chosen rumors, with one exception (everyday gossip at the office), were taken from real life cases and dealt with the manipulation of foodstuffs, malicious joy at the drunken escapades of famous personalities, and crazy stories centering on mobile phones.

Justification: as far as possible, rumors were considered whose options and whose assessment could at least in part be referred back to research results or practical experience. Naturally, there is scope for interpretation here that can then be judged neutrally. In other words, this scope for interpretation allows for rumors to be neither combated nor propagated.

The following four scenarios fulfilled these conditions:
- Killer SMS unsettles Egyptians
- Glass in baby food
- Does France's president have an alcohol problem?
- Rumors of an affair with your boss

The detailed implementation of this process can be demonstrated using the first case as an example.

Killer SMS Unsettles Egyptians (Initial Situation)
A text message is supposedly circulating in Egypt that kills you after you read it. According to a report in the daily newspaper *Egyptian Gazette,* a man in Mallawi, south of Cairo, died of a stroke shortly after receiving one of these mysterious messages. The ominous, lethal message is supposedly made up of a combination of numbers that begins with a plus sign and ends with the numbers 111. The rumors have proved so stubborn that even the authorities have decided they have to take measures to prevent them from spreading.

Which of the following reactions would you recommend the authorities use?
- We know of no such case. (0)
- Three oil workers are suspected of spreading the rumor when they were bored and have now been arrested. (+)
- No SMS message exists, which causes severe headaches and consequently fatal cerebral hemorrage. (–)

Whom would one believe the most when rumors are being combated?
- A press officer of the mobile phone company. (–)
- A high-ranking government official. (0)
- The mayor of the municipality of Mallawi, the place where the first case is supposed to have happened. (+)

The tourism minister is worried about the damage the rumor might do abroad and has already learned that Swiss newspapers have reported on it. What would you advise him to do?
- Nothing, just let the matter die down. (+)
- Call a press conference. (–)
- Launch a special offer through travel agencies for cheap mobile calls for foreign visitors. (0)

You are in Egypt and hear about this rumor in the hotel lobby. How would you react?
- Immediately warn the others in my travel group. (–)
- Ring the Swiss consulate. (+)
- Stop using my mobile phone during my holiday. (0)

As part of the exhibition concept, the background material for the Rumour Fighter was prepared as didactic material for school classes (secondary school levels I and II) because young people and young adults were an important target group for the exhibition.[20]

20 See http://www.mfk.ch/fileadmin/
pdfs/Bildung_Vermittlung/Materialien/
Ausstellungen/Geruecht/Geruecht_
DidaktischeMaterialien_final.pdf
(accessed October 16, 2009), resp.,
http://www.mfk-berlin.de/fileadmin/
images/berlin/PDF/Geruechte-Didak-
tischeMaterialien-Final_MKB.pdf
(accessed October 1, 2010).

Discussion

By understanding the various aspects of rumors, communication designers will be better able to achieve communication goals when working without confirmed facts. This is important in all sorts of professional communication where the unique feature of a piece of information, a service, or a product has to be highlighted, yet often without confirmed facts. For example, when the communication target is to convey a political message, such as the benefits of the European Union, or to create an image for a new car by claiming that it is the best car ever. One might say that the communication design concept of storytelling is a form of creating a rumor about a product or service.

Besides the relevance for the discipline and profession, it should be recognized that facilitating communication is the core business of communication design. The communication designer has to choose the appropriate medium and design a message so that the recipient can understand it.

We assume that for a contemporary communication designer, it is important to discern the impact of a good story, which does not necessarily involve proven facts to achieve the communication target, as opposed to the role of confirming facts in that story. In short, arguing with hard facts does not necessarily make a story compelling, as storytellers know. As communication designers, we were consequently challenged by having to communicate complex research results to a broad, mass public or to school classes. Not only the medium and the setting had to be developed, but we were also responsible for the staging and the screen design. This was part of the steering of the whole communication process (medium, setting, and staging).

The success of the exhibition and the popularity of the Rumour Fighter, first at the Museum for Communication in Bern and then at the Museum for Communication in Berlin,[21] was thus a form of positive payback for the research team, opening up perspectives for future research and increasing their expertise in communicating about this societally important, emotionally charged topic. In concrete terms, there is the potential for further analysis of the "visitor rumors" that were collected during the exhibitions,[22] and there should also be an analysis of the didactic and teaching-related experiences gained with the interactive Rumour Fighter in the school and education sectors (initial queries have already been received from the corporate sector). We conclude that a dash of interdisciplinary daring can prove unexpectedly enriching in the research field and unexpectedly so in practice; this was itself perhaps only a rumor before, but it has now been proven to be fact.

21 See http://www.mfk.ch/ausstellungen/ausstellungsarchiv/ausstellungsarchiv-aelter/ (accessed October 6, 2016), http://www.mfk.ch/geruecht.html (accessed October 16, 2009), and http://www.mfk-berlin.de/nc/ausstellung/aktuelle ausstellungen/details/events/1613/p1/detail.html (accessed October 1, 2010).

22 See http://www.facebook.com/geruecht (accessed October 16, 2009).