

A CLASSIFICATION FRAMEWORK OF INTERNET RUMORS

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ABSTRACT

Rumor is a ubiquitous social phenomenon. However, it received scant attention from the social scientists. This research aims to suggest a classification framework based on the possible sources of Internet rumors. Moreover, seven hundred and thirty rumors were collected to verify the proposed framework.

INTRODUCTION

Rumors are prevalent in everyday life. They reflect the underlying hopes, fears, hostilities and anxiety of the public, and they also serve to express and gratify the emotional needs of the community [1]. Overall, rumors provide us with an insight into the structure of the society. The study reported here has two broad aims. First, we aim to suggest a classification framework of Internet rumors which takes the characteristics of new technology into consideration. Second, hundreds of Internet rumors were collected and analyzed to provide the empirical verification of the proposed classification framework. Further, the result can provide us with an insight into the structure of the contemporary society.

METHOD

An empirical examination of the proposed framework is conducted. Seven hundred and thirty rumors circulated on the Internet until the end of 2009 were collected and then classified according to the 8 types of rumors proposed above. We monitored and searched Internet and BBS for discussions of rumors. The main sources of postings acquired in current study include rumor discussion board in university BBS, wide spread e-mails, and websites that collect and discuss rumors.

All the messages were analyzed by two independent judges according to the content and wording of each article, which was then classified into one of the 8 typologies. The initial agreement between the two judges was 95 percent. Disagreements were discussed and resolved. The number of postings and percentage distributions were shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Classification result of Internet rumors

Types of rumor	Number of postings	Percentage
Event-driven rumor	55	7.53%
Fabricated rumor	93	12.74%
Paradoxical rumor	179	24.52%
Inference-based rumor	14	1.92%
Alteration-based rumor	18	2.47%
Experience-based rumor	158	21.64%
Reported-based rumor	185	25.34%
Rumors that mix the spurious with the genuine	28	3.84%
Total	730	100%

The analysis indicated that the proposed classification framework can extensively cover the circulated Internet rumors because all the collected messages were classified into one of the eight categories. Following are examples of several types of Internet rumors.

In paradoxical rumor, a story was circulated on the Internet describing a young girl died from cancer because she drinks water that was refilled in the same plastic bottle for 16 month. The statement warns that not to use the same bottle repeatedly more than one weak because the diethylhydroxylamine (DEHA) may be liberated into the water filled in the polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottle and thus lead to cancer. The fact that bottles which filled with mineral water was made from PET is true, and that PET contained DEHA materials is also beyond doubt. However, the truth regarding whether the repeated use of PET bottle causes cancer has not been verified.

Fabricated rumor is a mirror of anxiety or fear of public. For example, a widely spread message claims that a tourist in Leofoo Village, a famous pleasure ground in Taiwan, was injured badly because her hair was embroiled in the machine and her scalp was torn off when she rode Pagoda's Revenge (a free falling facility).

An inference-based rumor described an owner of an apparel store suddenly died from intoxication of arsenic. The investigation explains that she ate large amount of shrimps after taking vitamin C, which were then induced a chemical action and produced arsenic in her stomach. The story comes from the chemical formula but it can be applied in real settings only when other conditions (i.e. temperature, size of a dose, etc.) were also conformed to those in the controlled situation. Another variation of the same story includes people died from eating shrimps that cooked with lemon (vitamin C). The other similar tale also described a women died from arsenic because she ate carrot and vitamin B at the same time.

Worth1000.com is the top creative competition and photoshop contest site on the web. Large amounts of works were posted on the web site and some of them were transmitted through the Internet, which are all classified as the alteration-based rumor in current study. Another well-known example, which is a prank by someone, is the water melon that was painted blue and was claimed that it is an experimental product from a DNA farming laboratory in China.

Overall, the result of current study showed that the reported-based (25.34%), paradoxical rumor (24.52) and experience-based (21.64) accounted for more than half of the circulated messages. This indicated that the objective statement provided by onlookers, messages with evidence or testimony, or personnel experiences are more credible sources and thus more persuasive.

The findings confirmed Larson's [2] statement that expertise, having knowledge and experience of a speaker give a message sender more credibility. Moreover, in discussing the selection of credible news in an over-communicated society, Graber [3] indicates that the first step in processing and formulating opinions is attentional arousal. In studying why people pay attention to news, she discovered that 26% indicated that it was for reasons of personal relevance, whereas 20% indicated the reason to be the emotional appeal of the headlines.

CONCLUSION

Current study suggested eight types of rumors circulated on the Internet, some of which share similar characteristics of traditional rumors passed on through word of mouth, and others emerged with the advancement of information technology as well as the convenience of the progressive Internet services such as e-mail and the WWW. In addition, we also provide an empirical testing of the schema by analyzing hundreds of rumors circulated on the Internet.

REFERENCES

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