

Rumour Management Manual: a training guide



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Why a training about rumours?

Rumours have always been both a blessing and a curse for journalists. A blessing because even if a rumour is unfounded, it may lead them to a good story and a curse as rumours make them face difficult choices (publish or not publish) that put their credibility at risk.

Investigative, serious journalism seeks to verify rumours and report on facts only. Unfortunately, shortages of staff and resources make it often hard for journalists to check every aspects of a rumour. Add the pressure of deadlines and the public's strong appetite for scandals and it becomes more and more tempting for journalists to repeat rumours, even if it is to then refute them later.

In the West, with the high increase in personal blogs and amateur news websites, rumours are blossoming and can do a lot of damage, even when reputable news agencies clearly prove them wrong, the rumour about President Obama not being an American citizen is a good example of it. But in conflict settings rumours can do much more than ruin a reputation or change the odds of an election, in fragile societies, rumours can be extremely dangerous, tipping a group towards unnecessary violence, undoing months of trust-building or peace negotiations.

Journalists working in conflict settings must therefore be highly conscious of the dangers of rumour reporting. In this short workshop, we seek to explain the mechanisms of rumours and lay out strategies to best deal with them in a constructive, responsible manner. Ideally, communities and governments officials should also receive similar training so that rumours, whether they are maliciously spread or have emerged spontaneously, have less chances of wrecking havoc.

Specific Objectives

This training guide has been designed to empower journalists to deal with rumours in an appropriate manner that will improve the credibility of the media, educate the public and as a result, strengthen democracy.

Learning Objectives: There are three distinct, interrelated learning objectives that inform the work of this training.

Knowledge:

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

- Explain what a rumour is and its potentially lethal consequences

Skills:

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

- Handle a rumour as a journalist, in a professional manner and in a way that will not cause violence or further damage
- Develop strategies to reduce the risk of the emergence and spread of rumours

Attitudes:

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

- Recognise their role and responsibilities as journalists in a conflict situation when dealing with rumours

Méthodologie

The methodology for the training guide is based on the following adult learning principles:

- Learning is self-directed
- It fills an immediate need and is highly participatory
- Learning is experiential (participants and the trainer learn from one another)
- Time is allowed for reflection and corrective feedback
- A mutually respectful environment is created by participants and trainer(s) to enhance learning
- The environment and atmosphere created are safe for the exchange of learning

Preparation

Here's a list of things not to forget when preparing a training:

- Inform the participants about the following: the training programme; the framework and schedule for the training; the level of the training; the name of the facilitator.
- Materials necessary for the training: sufficient space; a list of participants; tables and chairs in the form of a U or a circle; one or more boards; different coloured markers; sticky tape for fixing papers to the walls; notebooks and pens for the participants; a projector; loudspeakers; drinks; copies of the handouts you'll find in this guidebook and training evaluation forms.
- Written evaluation at the end of the training: prepare a brief questionnaire about the training and distribute it at the end. It should be anonymous, so that participants feel able to share honest opinions about the training, the organisation of the training, and the work done by the facilitator.



Unit 1

Unit 1

Notes to Facilitator

Time: 30 minutes

Resources: Flip Chart (write Learning objectives on flip chart)

Learning Activities

Participants introduce themselves briefly and why they are in this workshop.

Facilitators introduce themselves and give a brief overview of the workshop as well as all the necessary logistical information.

Unit 2

Notes to Facilitator

Time: 30 minutes

Resources: Flip chart

NOTE:

Let participants come up with own answers but make sure key characteristics are included:

- The information goes around through word-of-mouth
- The original message gets simplified as details get lost or distorted along the way
- The information is repeated without verification or confirmation and in many instances exaggerated.
- What people can't remember, they often invent to fill the gaps

Learning Activities

Facilitator whispers rather quickly in the first participant's ear:

"You have great responsibilities as a journalist as the media can play a crucial role in either strengthening democracy or contributing to fear and violence. The fact that you are here today shows that you have chosen to be a force for good, thank you".

Then the participant must repeat the sentence in his/her neighbor's ear and the message must go around the full circle until the last participant repeats it out loud. Questions or requests to repeat the message are not allowed.

Once a message has been "delivered", compare it to original one: what happened?

Based on this quick example, can you point out the characteristics of a rumour?

Ask: Can a rumour ever be a good thing? Think about it, and we will get back to this question later.

Unit 3

Time: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Resources: flipchart – write in advance on flipchart Flip Chart #1

Notes to facilitator:

When you go over Flipchart #1, condition #4 is very important: see flipchart #1

A rumour will take hold only if it resonates with the community, i.e it meets the emotional needs of the community.

Example:

People put a lot of hope in their new President and so stories start circulating that he has supernatural powers. The rumours capture the community's need to believe that the President will somehow solve all their problems.

Most of the time however, the rumours will appeal to the darker side of the community, reflecting their deepest fears and prejudices. In times of trouble, it is a very human reaction to want to find someone to blame and be angry at.

Example:

Rumours circulate about a minority ethnic group conspiring against the government. With spare resources, this rumour gives permission to the community to discriminate against them without feeling guilty.

Condition #5 from Flipchart 1: can be “successful” only if other conditions are met.

Example:

A man drops dead, coming home from a bar. This unfortunate incident may be exploited by a rival or an enemy to start a rumour that the man was poisoned by the bar owner. However, the rumour will probably not go far if the public does not have a conscious need to believe the rumour. For many people in the community, it is easier to blame someone and say it was poison, rather than accept that if they drink too much for too long, they may die from it.

So, can a rumour be a good thing?

Let participants discuss but make sure the following point is made:

Not all rumours have negative or violent consequences as some may be harmless or even have a positive outcome. But the existence of rumours is always a sign that other channels of communication have broken down or are not trusted. Even when the message is positive (ex President has super-natural powers), a rumour is often the sign that people are not taking responsibility for their lives. And democracy demands responsible citizens that make rational decisions.

Learning Activities:

Put participants in groups of 3 or 4 and ask them to share among themselves examples of rumours they have come across.

Appoint a note taker for each group and once they have shared their stories within their small group ask them to discuss: What are the commonalities between the different stories? What do they see as conditions necessary for rumours to spread?

Have each group report back and then show Flipchart #1 and go over each point, asking for comments. Go over condition #4 and #5 in more details (see notes).

Ask again: can a rumour ever be a good thing? (see notes)

Unit 4

Time: 1 hour

Resources: flipchart

Notes to Facilitator

NOTE for condition #1 from Flipchart 1:

Journalists cannot do much about the fact that the general population is under-educated but it can make sure that they take every opportunity presented to explain important concepts. For instance, when reporting on justice issues, include a paragraph on how the justice system is supposed to be independent from the executive branch in a democracy. Or when reporting on HIV/AIDS, remind readers, even if very briefly, on how one can catch – or not catch – HIV/AIDS.

Learning Activities:

When faced with rumours what can journalists do?

Start with condition #1: what strategies can you use to deal with the fact that your readers/listeners or viewers are mostly under-educated?

Discuss with participants as a large group (see note) and then create 4 small groups to discuss Condition #2, 3, 4, 5

- Does this condition exist in the community you work in?
- What would your role be as a journalist faced with these conditions?
- What strategies can you put in place to minimise the risk of spreading rumours?

Have each group report back.

Unit 5

Time: 2 hours

Resources: flip chart paper, scenario #1, 2, 3 written on separate pieces of paper

Notes for Facilitator:

When you debrief the groups, let the other participants give their feedback first, encourage discussion.

At the end, make sure the following key learning points have been included:

- Have a large network of people you know all across the country so you can check facts quickly: from government officials, to community leaders and army officers
- Give samples of reactions to give a nuanced picture: not everyone feels the same way about an issue
- Give background information, find out the history of the issues you report on
- Ask government officials to comment, help them “manage the crisis” and understand how important it is that they communicate with the community
- Discuss the consequences of potential scenarios: if the community acts on the rumour, what may happen?
- Take responsibility as a journalist to always be honest, and present the truth. Aim to be objective.

Learning Activities:

So we have reviewed the different strategies that you can put in place to deal with rumours in general. Let’s now see how to best respond to a crisis situation.

Create 3 groups and give them each one scenario. Tell them they have to develop a plan on how to collect all the information they need, and will be allocated an hour to present the story:

- Who are they going to call?
- What questions are they going to ask?
- What will they include in their story?
- What additional steps will they take?

Scenario #1

It is election time and a group close to one of the political parties is claiming that the Presidential candidate of the rival party does not deserve his War Medal of Honor, that he lied about being a hero, and took credit for something he did not do.

Scenario #2

People are saying that refugees are getting bigger allowances than widows do. The rumour is circulating fast and there have been already incidents of angry mobs attacking refugee camps already.

Scenario #3

The exact location of the country's Northern border has been in dispute for many years. It is said that the President of the neighboring country is buying up arms and training militias to attack soon and push the border back by 35 kilometers. It is believed that important gas reserves may lay be found underground.

UNIT 6

Time: 30 minutes

Resources: flip chart, Hand Out #1

Learning Activities

In pairs, ask participants to discuss:

- What were the key learning points for you in this workshop?
- What insights did you gain about your role as a journalist?
- What will you do differently from today as a result of this workshop?

Give pairs 10 minutes to discuss. Then ask them to share some of what came up in the larger group, and write their answers on the flip chart.

As a way of recapping, distribute Hand Out #1

Conditions needed for a rumour to spread:

1. lack of education: an uneducated public will be more gullible and less likely to check the information (but rumours exist also in educated countries)
2. lack of transparency: when explanations are not given, the public starts inventing, usually assuming the worst
3. lack of credibility of the media: the community does not trust the information given through the official channels and so looks for other sources of information
4. strong emotions: the rumour captures the mood and emotional needs of the community
5. hidden agenda: an individual or group may take advantage of an incident to spread a malicious rumour that advances their agenda and/or harms their competition.

	Action	Consequences	Final Outcome
Professional Journalists	Use every opportunity to educate his or her readers.	Public can better understand the issues in their context.	Citizens are better equipped to make decisions.
	Hold elected officials and politicians accountable for what they say and do.	Elected officials and politicians have to behave well and explain how decisions are taken.	Trust in the democratic system increases.
	Investigate rumours, but publish only verified stories so the community can distinguish between facts and rumours.	Community is well informed and can make better decisions.	Credibility of the media is enhanced.
	Through informal conversations, journalists gauge the community's mood, put incidents in perspective and analyze underlying causes.	The public is better placed to objectively analyze events.	Potential for violence decreases.
	Journalists always ask: <i>Who benefits from this rumour?</i> and investigate whether facts were purposely manipulated.	Hidden agendas are exposed.	Media plays its role in the democratic system, preventing abuse of power.
Unprofessional Journalists	Report on just the story at hand, without giving any context or explanation.	Readers' reactions are at times based on false assumptions.	Information is distorted, creates disruption and possibly violence.
	Act as the mouthpiece of the government or some special interests.	Elected officials and politicians can manipulate the media to suit their agenda.	The media loses credibility.
	Repeat rumours as news, without verifying the facts or putting the information into context	Community is "left in the dark" and much more prone to manipulation and emotional outbursts of violence.	Democracy and the rule of law are weakened.

Search for Common Ground

Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground works to transform the way the world deals with conflict - away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving. We work with local partners to find culturally appropriate means to strengthen societies' capacity to deal with conflicts constructively: to understand the differences and act on the commonalities.

Radio for Peacebuilding Africa

Search for Common Ground's Radio for Peacebuilding Africa is a rapidly growing project working in 20 African countries to increase the knowledge and skills of radio broadcasters, particularly youth radio broadcasters, in fair and balanced reporting. The project aims to improve the communication flow between government officials, policy makers, the press and civil society. For more information, visit our website at: <<http://www.radiopeaceafrica.org>>.

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