THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF RUMOURS

22 FEBRUARY 2010
SINGAPORE

S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

PONDER THE IMPROBABLE

NATIONAL SECURITY
COORDINATION SECRETARIAT

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF RUMOURS

REPORT ON A WORKSHOP ORGANIZED BY
THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY (CENS)
AT THE S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (RSIS),
NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY, SINGAPORE

WITH THE SUPPORT OF
THE NATIONAL SECURITY COORDINATION SECRETARIAT (NSCS)
AT THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, SINGAPORE

22 FEBRUARY 2010
MARINA MANDARIN HOTEL, SINGAPORE

S.RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
2010

Contents Page

This report summarizes the proceedings of the conference as interpreted by the assigned rapporteurs and editor of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this report.

The conference adheres to a variation of the Chatham House rules. Accordingly, beyond the points expressed in the prepared papers, no attributions have been included in this conference report.

Executive Summary

On 22 February 2010, the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), with the support of the National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS), organized a workshop entitled "The Political and Social Impact of Rumours" at the Marina Mandarin Hotel, Singapore.

The workshop had two broad goals: firstly, to explore the effect – positive or negative – of rumours on the social and political fabric of communities; secondly, to explore whether understandings of rumours may improve strategic communication efforts within the security and policy arenas. To that end academics, researchers, and practitioners from a broad range of domains came together in Singapore to present papers on this subject. There have been workshops and conferences on rumours and related aspects of informal communication over the years; this, however, was the first to explicitly explore the implications of rumours for national security policy and strategic communications campaigns.

In much of the literature rumours are often examined in a negative light: as instigators of violence, stoking hatreds, or creating impediments to public service delivery. The organizers of the workshop took a more agnostic view of rumours, viewing them largely as expressions of belief or plausibility that may at times run counter to official (government) communications. However, that is not to say there was consensus amongst all speakers of this stance and rumours were examined through a variety of lenses at the workshop.

The first panel set out to clarify some of the definitional murkiness which tends to associate itself with rumours. Two papers examined the epistemology of rumour with a third paper taking a critical look at research trends in this area. Matthew Dentith presented a paper arguing that while intentionally malicious rumours may represent an abnormality of the normal transmission of beliefs, rumours in and of themselves represent a reliable transmission process. Axel Gelfert complemented this philosophical approach to rumours, albeit with a more Kantian perspective. Gelfert also explored the policy implications of this approach to rumours both in terms of how (or indeed, whether) government may rebut rumours, but also in regards to policy on freedom of communication and information.

Rounding out the panel Pascal Froissart took a critical look at rumour scholarship over the past thirty years and highlighted what he termed the 'media blindness' of rumour scholarship. Rumour is generally seen as word-of-mouth or 'unoffical' communication that happens outside of authoritative communication channels. However, Froissart's paper examined rumour sources and found media to be a large supplier and transmitter of rumours; yet virtually all definitions of rumours ignore media as a source and sticks to the traditional definitions of word of mouth transmission.

The second panel was wide-ranging in its exploration of the role rumours play in the political and social life of a number of very different countries. Babak Rahimi drew on his recent fieldwork in Iran to explore the role rumours played in the tumultuous election period of 2009. By exploring rumours circulating amongst opposition supporters as well as rumours intentionally crafted by authorities, Rahimi's case study highlighted the sense-making role that rumours can play during times of uncertainty. Mark Woodward also utilized his extensive fieldwork in Indonesia to study antagonistic rumours between authorities and those in opposition over the past thirty years. Uniquely, Woodward's paper argued that a thorough understanding of local mythology can help explain the prevalence of, and belief in, persistent rumours.

Claire Seung-eun Lee looked at state reactions to online rumours in South Korea by examining the case of a South Korean blogger nicknamed 'Minerva' whose (accurate) rumours were deemed by authorities to be a threat to the national economy. For Lee, this case highlighted the lack of democratic relations in South Korean civil society as well as the fact there still is a relatively high degree of government control over public discourse.

The last panel examined the impact that rumours can have on government strategic communication efforts. While each of the papers approached the matter differently, there seemed to be a consensus on the importance of being cognizant of rumours as a way to understand community beliefs. Here the role of narrative in belief formation and sense-making efforts is key.

Chris Lundry presented a paper co-authored with Pauline Hope Cheong that provided a case study of rumours surrounding the terrorist Noordin Top. Lundry examined the efficacy of state-sanctioned rumours as a counter-terrorism strategy. Scott W. Ruston's paper, co-authored with Daniel Bernardi, examined the manner in which rumours have adversely impacted strategic and tactical initiatives by government and non-government agencies in Iraq. H. Raghav Rao presented a paper co-authored with Onook Oh and Manish Agrawal that applied a classic social psychology model of rumours to analyze twitter updates during the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008.

Finally, Todd Leventhal presented a paper drawing on his extensive experience dealing with both disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories to advocate changes in the way governments approach their strategic communication efforts.

PANEL I
Examining the Philosophy and Theory of Rumours

"Have You Heard? The Rumour as Reliable"

Matthew Dentith presented a paper examining the reliability of rumours as "warranted beliefs" and contrasting them with conspiracies and gossip.

Dentith discussed the philosopher Tony Coady's treatment of rumours as "pathologies of testimony;" that is, rumours are seen as being representative of unreliable beliefs and so speakers of rumours lack the authority to put forth such propositions. Speakers often do not know if the information spread is true. However, Dentith asserted that rumours are expressions and not assertions of beliefs. In addition, Dentith posited that rumours should be thought of as a social grooming activity that individuals engage in to test out such assertions of belief.

The appeal and diffusion of rumours lies in their coherence with existing social beliefs. When rumours fit people's perception of events, or what is already seen or known, they are more likely to be treated as plausible pieces of information. This also implies that rumour diffusion follows a reliable transmission process where the shared content is constantly tested or matched against an individual or a community's existing perceptions of events. As such, the longer a rumour survives, the greater is the tendency for people to think it is true given its survival due to matching pre-existing ideas and beliefs.

Dentith then discussed the differences he saw between rumours and rumour-mongering; the latter for Dentith is not merely the passing of malicious rumours but also entails the deliberate dissemination of false information to validate and justify societal fears and beliefs. False rumours can be treated as plausible information especially when they are transmitted and endorsed by authoritative figures. To this extent, rumours can at times resemble conspiracy theories and spread quickly in communities. Dentith cautioned, however, that this is an example of how a normally reliable rumour-transmission process could be abused; as such, rumours should not be mistaken for conspiracies.

Conspiracy theories differ significantly in Dentith's estimation from rumours in that they function as alternative explanations of actual events. They are assertions of what is perceived as the omitted "truth". Conspiracy theories do not follow or support popular belief but aim to challenge the status quo by offering a competing "official" account of events. Hence, conspiracy theories always have "rivals" in official narratives. In contrast, rumours do not have an official status and, more often, are "have-you-heard" questions that attempt to reaffirm existing suspicions or experiences. It was also added that as soon as the rumour content can be verified, it ceases to be a rumour per se.

In conclusion, it was opined that rumours are queries that test out propositions rather than assertions or claims. When the content of a rumour cohere with what is known and can be testified, it is passed on and diffused as probable information.

"Rumour, Gossip and Conspiracy Theories: The Social Epistemology of Pathologies of Testimony"

Axel Gelfert explored in his paper the environment that gives rise to rumour, pathologies of testimony, and what the ramifications of this philosophical perspective are for policymakers.

Gossip, rumours and urban myths are usually studied as part of the "pathology of testimony". Tony Coady, a philosopher focusing on the epistemological problems posed by testimony, originally used "pathology of testimony" as an umbrella term to describe decorative speech acts that are somehow found to be morally or epistemologically suspicious. Gossip is commonly thought to be malicious, rumour as unreliable and urban myth as mere fiction. However, Gelfert opined that gossip need not be unreliable and could persist as rumours.

Gelfert suggested that "pathology of testimony" should include any type of overt informative speech act that disrespects people and their capacity as rational beings. This stems from Immanuel Kant's assertion that "the intentional spreading of something that detracts from another's honour, even if it is not a matter of public justice and even if what is said is true, diminishes respect for humanity". According

to Gelfert, this captures the way speech acts are delivered and how people are treated. He added that when someone passes something off as truthful, it is a form of disrespect to the hearers as it exploits their gullibility.

Gossip, rumours, conspiracy theories and urban myths have different spheres of influence. Gossip and rumour, for example, do not usually spread beyond an intended social group. They are directed at acquaintances and, for rumours, they "fade out" over time when there is no evidence to support the claims. Indeed, the boundaries between gossip and rumour are not clear in Gelfert's estimation as gossip might persist as rumour.

On the other hand, conspiracy theorists actively seek new and large audiences and challenge the status quo. They are usually spread by groups that are suspicious of the motives of larger societies. Conspiracy theories are sufficiently complex and are seen as an alternative to official accounts.

From a policymaking perspective, Gelfert mentioned that rumours and conspiracy theories present a challenge as one would have to determine whether they merit any attention or response. He added that they deserve to be treated seriously if and only if there are good grounds to believe that recipients of rumours will distrust public sources of information or if there is a lack of reliable information sources.

Information gaps, which may arise out of benign government communications policy, can sometimes favour the growth of rumours and conspiracy theories. Hence, to pre-empt rumours, information should be readily available and information deficits should not be allowed to occur.

Finally, Gelfert felt that people must be allowed to test their knowledge in the public sphere. It is through individual participation in free reasoned discourse, and when information flows are not hindered, that appropriate levels of public trust can be built upon. The lack of such things can provide solid bases for the build-up of rumours and conspiracy theories. Hence, he concluded that instead of rebutting isolated rumours and conspiracy theories, an environment that is conducive for free reasoned discourse should be encouraged in order to prevent their occurrence in the first place.

"Is Rumour Media Blinded? For a Critical Theory of Rumour"

Pascal Froissart's paper discussed the role of media in rumour diffusion and how its influence has largely been understated in rumour research throughout the ages. Noting that rumours are always diffused through a mix of formal and informal media, Froissart found it strange that most rumour theories do not fully consider the influence that mass media has in rumour propagation.

In an example of media-led rumour diffusion, Froissart noted that in 1969 a novel, essay and journal had so blown a classic abduction story out of proportion that communities in Orléans, France, believed the tale as true. The rumour would probably not have reached such a scale if the media was not involved. Edgar Morin, a sociologist, who first studied the Orléans rumour case, however, did not accord importance to the media and declared that the story was entirely false and spread mainly by word of mouth. In Froissart's opinion this is a case of "media blindness".

While there are a variety of definitions and theories of rumour they have largely centred on the notion of being unverified information most often spread by word of mouth. Froissart found in his study that while several works on rumours have attempted to index media sources of information, they have largely underplayed or failed to mention the contributions of media in rumour transmission. Contrary to the idea that rumours are unreliable information is that they can also be the result of, or originate from, either "reliable" journalistic works or "media-reporting mistakes". One example of this, according

to Froissart, is the practice of people (often famous) being declared dead and having their obituaries published when they are actually alive.

In some cases, public denials through popular media outlets have spread rather than curbed the spread of rumours. In 1978, Procter & Gamble's public denial of its linkages to cult groups have resulted in more people knowing about the cultic allegations against the organization. Since 1997, Froissart has also counted at least 500 rumours that were spread by television programmes such as "Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction" and "Mostly True Stories: Urban Legends Revealed". Likewise, Froissart also finds books and movies produced whose storylines are based on rumours. This underscores the potential of broadcast and print media as tools for rumour diffusion. Moreover, it was also added, it also dispels the notion that rumours are solely unreliable pieces of information that are diffused through unreliable—hence lacking the authoritativeness of official media—transmission tools and processes.

Froissart concluded that scholars of rumour tend not to pay much attention to the media's potential as a reliable rumour instigative and transmission tool due to existing perceptions and scholarly definitions that rumours are solely passed by word of mouth. In fact, it is media which has a large role to play both in crafting a more nuanced definition of rumour, and also in our understanding of how and why rumours start and spread.

Discussion

A number of questions and statements were generated on the papers presented. A participant questioned if there were not in fact similarities between urban myths and conspiracy theories in terms of the types of logic they follow and in their story-telling nature. A speaker clarified that while urban legends tend to be treated as the truth at times, they are more often stories with a moral lesson for the hearers. Unlike conspiracy theories, they are not explanations of actual events. Moreover, conspiracy theories are always tied to specific events and marketed as an alternative to the official account. Hence, urban legends are certainly not a variant of conspiracy theories.

Discussing what governments should do with regard to the spread of rumours, a participant added that timeframe would be a key issue in determining the action (or non-action) towards rumours and gossip. It was stated that for those involved in policymaking, the timeframe could be short and thus, people often expect governments to react and respond to situations rather quickly. While concurring broadly with this, a speaker noted that rumours can be temporally insensitive and such rumours may re-surface later as long as their content or general topic remains relevant to the respective community in which they circulate.

Rumours in Politics and Society

The Politics of Rumours: Informal Communication in the 2009 (Post-) Election Iranian Public Sphere

Babak Rahimi began his paper presentation arguing that Iranian politics is made up of conspiracy theories and rumours and that this has been the case for centuries. Rahimi posited that rumours and conspiracy theories are both mediums of communications for strategic use. There is a functional aspect to their usage, with both acting as a space where politics and ultimately identities are constructed. Rahimi argued that Iranian politics as a case study are a great example of how rumours and conspiracy theories not only play a role in how society constructs itself but also in the formation of the state itself.

Tracing these conspiratorial political ideas from the 19th century through the 20th century and today, Rahimi focused more closely on the Iranian presidential elections of June 2009.

Political communication in the course of electoral politics primarily evolved around unofficial discourses, mundane speeches and diverse voices, some of which could ultimately become official discourses that either challenge or maintain state power. Public opinion played a critical role in the elections, as actors employed various linguistic strategies to effectively advance their positions, or discredit opponents.

Rahimi discussed the wide array of rumours circulating in Iran in the weeks and days prior to the elections. He then focused on three specific cases of rumours: (i) rumours of election fraud that circulated during and after voting among anti-government voters; (ii) the use of rumours by authority voices to discredit anti-government voters and protestors; and (iii) rumours spread by authorities in the aftermath of the very public shooting of a protester.

Rahimi concluded his talk by discussing the logic of rumours and conspiracy theories in Iran. He argued that emerging new technologies like the Internet create an environment in which rumours thrive in virtual reality mostly because they can be coupled and decoupled from the source of the information; additionally, the barriers to entry and potential reputation costs are low.

Rahimi, however, suggested that conspiracies and rumours can be described as living texts of public performances, as dramas of suspense that seek to (de)stabilize an everyday understanding of reality to re-interpret the world in meaningful complex ways. This was demonstrated in how conspiracy theories and rumours played a critical role in the post-election politics of Iran.

Rumours, Religion and Political Mobilization: Indonesian Cases 1978–2009

Mark Woodward presented a paper based on extensive fieldwork in which he discussed two broad sets of rumours that have continued to circulate in Indonesia since the late 1970s. Woodward specifically examined how rumours can become part of official history. This is particularly the case when the power of the state is behind campaigns of disinformation or exploits rumours for their own uses that such rumours literally become "fact".

The first set of rumours is tied up with the origins of the New Order in Indonesia and the coming to power of Suharto; the second is tied to the fall of the New Order, but in a previous iteration had served as a counter-narrative to the first set of rumours.

In an attempted coup in 1965, a group of generals was killed and their bodies thrown into a well. Woodward argued that both this event and the subsequent rumours surrounding it was what led to the founding of the New Order. Within twenty-four hours of the event, the media began circulating what Woodward described as "official rumours". The generals were reported to have been killed and mutilated by a group of women associated with the communist party's women's movement called Gerikan Wanita Indonesia, or Gerwani.

These rumours drew on well-established mythological archetypes that resonated with Javanese listeners. Woodward argued that the closer rumours are tied to mythological archetypes, the more believable they are. In the case of the deceased generals and Gerwani, the rumour was based on the dangerous but powerful, sexually seductive Queen of the South Seas. However, while the Queen is domesticated in her marriage to the earthly Sultan, the Gerwani women represent undomesticated and dangerous female power.

Politically, they were exploited to justify the politicide of 1965 as well as the legal restrictions against communists and subsequent generations of their offspring that limited their access to education and other government programmes. They were also used in the construction and legitimization of the new state narrative with Indonesia locked in an eternal cosmic struggle with communism.

Even though there was no empirical basis to these rumours, they persisted, becoming the mythology of the New Order, and subsequently taught to generations of school children. Woodward posited that one could see these rumours become history when interviewing Javanese about the coup, with many repeating the rumour-bred "facts" taught in schools or disseminated through official media.

Counter rumours arose in response to delegitimize those put forward by the New Order. Circulating since the 1970s, these rumours were a response to the manipulation of Javanese symbols of authority by Suharto and his wife. However, the counter-discourse in this case turned out—in hindsight—to be true. These rumours and relayed stories of Suharto borrowing, stealing or buying sacred heirlooms from various places around Indonesia as well as his involvement in employing the services of practitioners of black magic were circulated widely. Remarkably consistent, even naming specific stolen sacred heirlooms, these rumours were rampant and were all spread by word of mouth as it would not have been possible to print such stories during Suharto's rule.

Woodword concluded his talk by arguing that the reasons that these stories persist is that they resonate strongly with very deeply-held beliefs and mythical archetypes in Indonesia. These rumours are used as mechanisms for coping with uncertainty and anxiety and for constructing mythological narratives, regardless of the political contexts in which they are located. Therefore, Woodward argued, much can be gained by examining rumours and conspiracy theories in Indonesia through the prism of mythology.

Rumour-Mongering in the South Korean Blogosphere

Claire Lee Seung-eun's paper focused on a case study of a blogger nicknamed Minerva, examining its implications for the use of South Korean cyberspace and civil society and state relations.

Minerva was the alias of an unemployed blogger, Dae-sung Park, who posted critical thoughts online concerning the state of the South Korean economy and the government's economic policies, accurately predicting in fact the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the plunge of the local currency. His analyses were spread in Korean cyberspace but the government considered his postings to be erroneous "rumours" about the actual state of the South Korean economy. However, throughout 2008 and 2009, Minerva's forecasts impacted many South Korean's investment decisions and affected the country's foreign exchange markets.

Minerva was charged with spreading false information with the intent of harming or threatening the public interest in South Korea. Lee pointed out that the importance of Minerva fell on the fact that his posts caught the eye of a large number of Korean netizens who were influenced by his posts.

Lee went on to state that while economic policymakers in South Korea felt relieved at the news of Minerva's arrest, they had to grapple with and reflect on why his writings had greater credibility for many Koreans than their own policies. Here, Lee proffered that the wilful misuse of cyberspace for rumour-mongering in South Korea is symbolic of the relative absence of democratic relations in civil society and the distortion of freedom of expression in the public sphere. In the Minerva case the levels of uncertainty and anxiety increased and people were inclined to take rumours at face value rather than examining their veracity. After Minerva's predictions on aspects of the economic situation during the crisis in 2008 were found to be spot on, Korean internet users gave credence to Minerva because his postings resonated with Koreans' intuitive concerns about life and money.

In conclusion, Lee offered two points vis-à-vis the Minerva case. Firstly, from the political impacts of the rumour-mongering surrounding Minerva, it is clear that the blogosphere in South Korea does not enjoy the freedom of expression that its anarchical nature may suggest, as evidenced by the state's arrest of Minerva. Secondly, Minerva's online analyses and his interpretations contradicted the interests and expectations of the South Korean government. The subsequent repressive response of the government shows that the internet is ultimately not a realm of communicational freedom in South Korea.

Discussion

One participant asked whether in attributing Indonesian politics to a set of deeply-held myths it was dangerously close to an Orientalist analysis. In response, a speaker noted that just as Suharto was engaged in cultivating mythologies in Indonesia, brutal realism was also employed. Furthermore, the speaker articulated that when one speaks to someone in Java, individuals at all levels of society are equally prepared to speak about the rumours associated with the New Order.

One participant asked whether mythology is present across the board in all the cases explored during the panel. The panellists agreed; in the case of Iran, actors are inventing stories based on their cultural heritage, while at the same time coming up with new and creative stories to fit the moment. In the case of South Korea, one speaker noted that culture, specifically Confucian values found in the country, play a large role in the formation of rumours.

Another participant asked if the speakers had been able to determine whether rumours created by the state or private individuals had greater resonance. In response, one speaker said that the power of states to put forward and disseminate rumours was difficult to compete with and that their ability to transform a rumour into fact was remarkable and unfortunate. That said, it was added that in the case of Indonesia, no matter what the state did to try to stop the counter-narrative rumours put forward against the New Order government, the rumours persisted even after the fall of the Suharto government.

<div align="center">

PANEL III

The Impact of Rumours on Strategic Communication

</div>

Rumour and Strategic Communication Across Old and New Media in Southeast Asia: the Case of Terrorist Noordin Top

Presenting his paper co-authored with **Pauline Hope Cheong, Chris Lundry** demonstrated that the production and dissemination of terrorist-related rumours via web-based applications may accelerate the intensity of propaganda disseminaton and the rate that rumours gain traction in a mediated social system. Through the case study of rumours surrounding terrorist Noordin Top, Lundry examined the efficacy of state-sanctioned rumours as a counter-terrorism strategy.

Although Noordin Top commanded a following among jihadists in Southeast Asia, his demise was not followed by a eulogical discourse of martyrdom amongst supporters, the norm for terrorist leaders of his status. Lundry attributed this to the Indonesian government's successful political propaganda. He noted that the government introduced speculative details from Top's autopsy alluding to his indulgence in sodomy, a socially deviant and taboo act. Even though this allegation was not conclusively verified, it nevertheless remained a blemish on Top's legacy, undermining his moral authority. Given the sensational nature of the rumour, it quickly gained online traction, especially in the form of parodies. The symbolic feminization of Top through such means had the effect of denigrating the terrorists' cause.

Lundry concluded that a key factor for the successful attempt to posthumously discredit Top was due to the fact that it was almost impossible for Top's supporters to equivocally dispel the propagated rumour. However, it was also noted that the appeal of the rumour was limited to an insular community of like-minded individuals and was thus not widely discussed beyond that select group.

The Triangle of Death: Strategic Communication, Counterinsurgency Ops, and the Rumour Mill

Scott W. Ruston presented a co-written paper with Daniel Bernardi that examined the manner in which rumours have adversely impacted strategic and tactical initiatives by government and non-government agencies by drawing on the case study of contemporary Iraq. He opined that rumours have the greatest likelihood of impeding strategic communication efforts during times of social upheaval and political instability, driving wedges between constituent populations, between populations and their governments and between governments and their allies. This was demonstrated in the circulation of rumours in Iraq portraying the U.S. intentions in a negative light,

which undermined diplomatic, military and government efforts throughout the country during the U.S. invasion and occupation.

On the question of how information operations could achieve their goals in a communication landscape besieged by what amounts to narrative "improvised-explosive devices", Ruston was of the view that the United States maintain a coherent narrative with few gaps. Moreover, there was also the need to recognize the prevailing narratives circulating within the contested population as they provide insights to the concerns and insecurities of the local population.

Ruston highlighted three types of rumours that pose the greatest threat to the strategic communication efforts of government and non-government agencies: they are rumours (i) that link to master narratives, (ii) exploit narrative gaps, and (iii) are involved in coercion and consent processes.

Ruston also identified two narrative counter measures to maintain or regain narrative ground from rumours affecting key populations. Firstly, frame new strategic communication efforts within a context of narrative fidelity. Secondly, exploit the narrative coherence gaps of the opponent's narratives.

Analysis of Tweets and Rumours during the Mumbai Terrorist Attack of November 2008

Presenting his paper co-written with **Onook Oh** and **Manish Agrawal, H. Raghav Rao** applied a theory of rumours in social psychological theory to identify the relation of anxiety and rumours spread during the Mumbai attack of November 2008. By analyzing tweets posted during and immediately after the attacks, a strong correlation between anxiety and rumours during the attacks were

found. A key assumption in this theory is that environments of collective fear and anxiety, such as a terrorist attack, provide an optimal condition for rumour-mongering. If not controlled, deleterious rumours may potentially decrease national morale and plant distrust in government.

Rao noted that eyewitness accounts through Twitter were rapidly spreading across the world and drawing media attention. However, there was little attempt to verify the reliability of the Twitter users as a news source. Moreover, the content analysis found a correlation between rumour-mongering strengthening as emotional tensions escalate.

Rao concluded that while governments could encourage citizens' collaborative social reporting through Twitter, a prompt response system needs to be in place (i) to refute the high anxiety rumour with professional interpretations of the rumour, and (ii) to distribute the refutation through multiple communication channels such as cross links, RSS, email, text message and live TV.

Understanding the "Other" Through the Study of Rumour

Noting that rumours can serve as an early warning system about particular issues inflaming public opinion, **Todd Leventhal** argued for the study of rumours to gather information vital to the issue of how countries are perceived and what inaccurate perceptions and stereotypes need to be addressed.

Drawing on his experiences in tracking, analyzing and countering rumours and misinformation pertaining to issues such as the origins of AIDS and September 11th, Leventhal posited that conspiracy theories and unfounded rumours reveal the following insights about human belief: (i) many people have a strong tendency to frame issues involving danger or fear in a simplistic, good versus evil moral framework; (ii) finding an enemy "devil figure" to blame for real or imagined sins seems to be a deep-rooted and widespread human tendency; (iii) primitive "folk logic"

based largely on feelings and superficial associations is often more important than facts and reason; (iv) fear is a dominant emotion; (v) fears and accompanying rumours and conspiracy theories rise during times when events seem out of control; (vi) simplistic, uni-dimensional materialist thinking has great appeal; and (vii) long-standing historical animosities are easy to ignite.

On the implications for "myth management", Leventhal noted that conspiracy theories indicate that (i) others see the world in vastly different ways than ourselves and (ii) subjective perceptions often trump objective realities. As such, these subjective realities should be taken into account when shaping strategic communication strategies. Hence, there is a need to construct narratives that speak to the emotional realities they express, albeit in a way that is grounded in reality.

On building rapport with others, Leventhal outlined three processes. Firstly, approach the audience in terms of their familiar, with which they are comfortable, utilizing communications that evoke their core narratives and metaphors about the world and themselves. Novel ideas are off-putting and tend to dislocate and require too much effort. Secondly, communicate that you understand the target audience to make them feel safe. Should they feel threatened either by you or your advocacy of what is novel and unaccustomed, they will reject the messages being sent. Thirdly, to make the audience's familiar novel, outline a grand narrative that demonstrates how working together, the target audience gains without losing their authenticity.

Discussion

Reflecting on his experiences in Afghanistan, discussant **Justin Rashid** was of the opinion that the rumours people propagate provide insights into their character and beliefs. Hence, analyzing the rumour content in conflict zones provides a window into the minds of the enemy. This is especially valuable in societies with low literacy rates as the culture of narrative becomes important for local opinion shapers to communicate with the masses.

Rashid underscored the value of a systematic approach to counter-rumour strategies in conflict zones. Firstly, he noted that current responses to the propagation of anti-U.S. rumours in Afghanistan have been inconsistent due to competing demands for finite resources. However, by dispelling some rumours but not others, it sends the message that those the United States did not address are true. Secondly, he opined that the U.S. strategy of dispensing facts to the locals while laudable is unfortunately not gaining as much traction as the opponent's low tech but pragmatic and targeted strategy of propagating rumours. As such, he called for the incorporation of rumours propaganda into the psy-op strategic framework.

However, Rashid's recommendation to adopt the opponent's strategy raised concerns of the possibility that strategic communications will be reduced to the mere spinning of facts rather than responsible interpretation of them.

To ensure that the pursuit of truth unequivocally governs strategic decisions, it was suggested that a better approach would be to devise ways to defuse rumours altogether rather than to propagate new ones to rival those already out there.

Another key point raised pertained to the appeal of the insurgents' narratives. It was noted that a common thread of insurgent narrative was the portrayal of themselves as the underdog martyr or "romantic hero" battling against the "evil" status quo powers. As this plot appears to win them many supporters, what counter-plot do the status quo powers have to offer that is equally, if not more, compelling to win hearts and minds? While the impossibility of eradicating the emotional appeal of subversive narratives was acknowledged, it was noted that its appeal could be somewhat diminished if its claims are systematically discredited in a rational manner.

On the question of successful counter-rumour strategy, it was noted that the message of the counter-narrative also has to directly address the questions that the opponents are upset about, which is currently not always the case. It was noted, for instance, that Arabs oppose the Iraq war not because they think Americans mistreat Muslims but because of the political issue of Israel and Palestine. Another important consideration is for states to ensure that their rhetoric is matched with action.

Workshop Programme

Monday, 22nd February

0815-0850   **Registration**

0855-0900   **Welcome remarks** by
Kumar Ramakrishna, Head,
Centre of Excellence for
National Security, S. Rajaratnam
School of International Studies

0900-1045   **Panel I : Examining the
Philosophy and Theory of Rumours**

Chairperson
Norman Vasu, Deputy Head &
Coordinator, Social Resilience
Programme, Centre of Excellence
for National Security, RSIS

Presenters
**"Have you Heard? The Rumour
as Reliable"** by **Matthew Dentith**,
PhD Candidate, Department of
Philosophy,
University of Auckland

**"Rumour, Gossip, and
Conspiracy Theories:
The Social Epistemology
of Pathologies of Testimony"**
by **Axel Gelfert**,
Assistant Professor,
Department of Philosophy,
National University of Singapore

**"Is Rumour Media Blinded?
For a Critical Theory of
Rumour"** by **Pascal Froissart**,
Professor, Department of
Communications, Université de
Paris VIII

1045-1100   **Tea break**

1100-1245   **Panel II: Rumours in Politics
and Society**

Chairperson
Greg Dalziel,
Associate Research Fellow,
Centre of Excellence for
National Security, RSIS

Presenters
**"The Politics of Rumours:
Informal Communication in the
2009 (Post-) election Iranian
Public Sphere"** by **Babak Rahimi**,
Assistant Professor, Iranian
and Islamic Studies Program
for the Study of Religion,
Department of Literature,
University of California, San Diego

**"Rumours, Religion, and
Political Mobilization:
Indonesian Cases 1978 – 2009"**
by **Mark Woodward,**
Associate Professor,
School of History, Philosophy, and
Religion, Arizona State University

**"Rumour-Mongering in the
South Korean Blogosphere"** by
Claire Seung-eun Lee, PhD
Candidate, Department of
Sociology, National University
of Singapore

1245-1400   **Lunch**

1300–1400   **Panel III: The Impact of Rumours on Strategic Communication**

Chairperson
Kumar Ramakrishna, Head,
 Centre of Excellence for
National Security, RSIS

"Rumour and Strategic Communication Across Old and New Media in Southeast Asia: the Case of Terrorist Noordin Top" by **Chris Lundry**,
Postdoctoral Research Fellow,
Hugh Downs School of Human Communication,
Arizona State University

"The Triangle of Death: Strategic Communication, Counterinsurgency Ops, and the Rumour Mill" by **Scott W. Ruston**, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Consortium for Strategic Communication,
Arizona State University

"Analysis of Tweets and Rumours during the Mumbai Terrorist Attack of November 2008" by **H. Raghav Rao**,
Professor, School of Management,
SUNY-Buffalo

"Understanding the 'Other' Through the Study of Rumours" by **Todd Leventhal**, Senior Policy & Planning Officer, Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State

Discussant
Justin Rashid, Post-Graduate Student, Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California

About CENS

The Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) is a research unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Established on 1 April 2006, CENS is devoted to rigorous policy-relevant analysis of a range of national security issues. The CENS team is multinational in composition, comprising both Singaporean and foreign analysts who are specialists in various aspects of national and homeland security affairs.

Why CENS?

In August 2004 the Strategic Framework for National Security outlined the key structures, security measures and capability development programmes that would help Singapore deal with transnational terrorism in the near and long term.

However, strategizing national security policies requires greater research and understanding of the evolving security landscape. This is why CENS was established to increase the intellectual capital invested in strategizing national security.

To this end, CENS works closely with not just other RSIS research programmes, but also national security agencies such as the National Security Coordination Secretariat within the Prime Minister's Office.

What Research Does CENS Do?

CENS aspires to be an international research leader in the multi-disciplinary study of the concept of Resilience in all its aspects, and in the policy-relevant application of such research in order to promote Security within and beyond Singapore.

To this end, CENS conducts research in four main domains:

Radicalization Studies

• The multi-disciplinary study of the indicators and causes of violent radicalization, the promotion of community immunity to extremist ideas and best practices in individual rehabilitation. The assumption being that neutralizing violent radicalism presupposes individual and community resilience.

Social Resilience

• The systematic study of the sources of — and ways of promoting — the capacity of globalized, multicultural societies to hold together in the face of systemic shocks such as diseases and terrorist strikes.

Homeland Defence

• A broad domain encompassing risk perception, management and communication; and the study of best practices in societal engagement, dialogue and strategic communication in crises. The underlying theme is psychological resilience, as both a response and antidote to, societal stresses and perceptions of vulnerability.

Futures Studies
• The study of various theoretical and conceptual approaches to the systematic and rigorous study of emerging threats, as well as global trends and opportunities — on the assumption that Resilience also encompasses robust visions of the future.

How Does CENS Help Influence National Security Policy?

Through policy-oriented analytical commentaries and other research output directed at the national security policy community in Singapore and beyond, CENS staff members promote greater awareness of emerging threats as well as global best practices in responding to those threats. In addition, CENS organises courses, seminars and workshops for local and foreign national security officials to facilitate networking and exposure to leading-edge thinking on the prevention of, and response to, national and homeland security threats.

How Does CENS Help Raise Public Awareness of National Security Issues?

To educate the wider public, CENS staff members regularly author articles in a number of security and intelligence related publications, as well as write op-ed analyses in leading newspapers. Radio and television interviews have allowed CENS staff to participate in and shape the public debate on critical issues such as risk assessment and horizon scanning, multiculturalism and social resilience, intelligence reform and defending critical infrastructure against mass-casualty terrorist attacks

How Does CENS Keep Abreast of Cutting Edge National Security Research?

The lean organisational structure of CENS permits a constant and regular influx of Visiting Fellows of international calibre through the Distinguished CENS Visitors Programme. This enables CENS to keep abreast of cutting edge global trends in national security research.

For More on CENS

Log on to http://www.rsis.edu.sg and follow the links to "Centre of Excellence for National Security".

About NSCS

The National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS) was set up in the Prime Minister's Office in Jul 2004 to facilitate national security policy coordination from a Whole-Of-Government perspective. NSCS reports to the Prime Minister through the Coordinating Minister for National Security (CMNS). The current CMNS is the Deputy Prime Minister Professor S. Jayakumar, who is also Minister for Law.

NSCS is headed by Permanent Secretary (National Security and Intelligence Coordination). The current PS(NSIC) is Mr Peter Ho, who is concurrently Head of Civil Service and Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

NSCS provides support to the ministerial-level Security Policy Review Committee (SPRC) and Senior official-level National Security Coordination Committee (NSCCom) and Intelligence Coordinating Committee (ICC). It organises and manages national security programmes, one example being the Asia-Pacific Programme for National Security Officers. NSCS also funds experimental, research or start-up projects that contribute to our national security.

NSCS is made up of two components: the National Security Coordination Centre (NSCC) and the Joint Counter-Terrorism Centre (JCTC). Each centre is headed by a director.

NSCC performs three vital roles in Singapore's national security: national security planning, policy coordination, and anticipating strategic threats. As a coordinating body, NSCC ensures that government agencies complement each other, and do not duplicate or perform competing tasks.

JCTC is a strategic analysis unit that compiles a holistic picture of terrorist threat. It studies the levels of preparedness in areas such as maritime terrorism and chemical, biological and radiological terrorist threats. It also maps out the consequences should an attack in that domain take place.

More information on NSCS can be found at **www.nscs.gov.sg**

About the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) was officially inaugurated on 1 January 2007. Before that, it was known as the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), which was established ten years earlier on 30 July 1996. Like its predecessor, RSIS was established as an autonomous entity within Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The School exists to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of Asia-Pacific security studies and international affairs. Its three core functions are research, graduate teaching and networking activities in the Asia-Pacific region. It produces cutting-edge security related research in Asia-Pacific Security, Conflict and Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Area Studies.

The School's activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific and their implications for Singapore.

For more information about RSIS, please visit **www.rsis.edu.sg**

**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

PONDER THE IMPROBABLE