

Chapter 3

Storytelling and the Rhetoric of Rumor in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media rumor is becoming a prominent spectacle thanks to the rapid surge of internet usage world-wide. However, little research has been done so far that takes social media rumor into account. This chapter attempts to understand the nature and narrative of social media rumor. The discussion revolves around three important and interlaced concepts: social media storytelling, social media rhetoric, and social media rumor. The chapter attempts to show that a story requires rhetoric to be successful and most of the rumours are successful stories because they contain rhetorical elements. To understand the storytelling and rhetorical aspects of social media rumors, remarks based on three prominent cases of social media rumors are presented. The conclusion is that social media rumors are more literary, have more emotional elements than logical proofs, and the structure is meticulously designed to have specific impacts. These features echo disinformation, an important mode of rumor.

INTRODUCTION

What changes do social media bring about? It is hard to answer in a few sentences as social media not only makes a few changes, but also transforms our lives and societies to a great degree. Social media touches almost every part of our lives. That is why it is one of the central areas of scientific and social research nowadays. Unlike traditional media audiences, social media users are exclusive in several respects. First, notice that we usually associate the words *audience* and *user* with traditional and social media, respectively. But why is that? The reason is that traditional media is based on linear communication, where one party produces and delivers the communication contents and another party passively receives and consumes them. However, in social media, everyone is a producer and consumer of communication

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contents. Gurel and Tigli (2014) sketch a few more tentative features of social media users: participant, migratory, unpredictable, difficult to manipulate, integrated and interactive, visible. Aichner and Jacob (2015) identify 13 types of social media. They are blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, products review, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, and virtual worlds (Aichner & Jacob, 2015, p. 259). Each of the platforms serves different purposes to its users with different communication facilities and experiences. Numerous researches have been done to date, exploring the communicative nature and tools of social media platforms (Boonstra, 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Gurel & Tigli, 2014). Researches also deal with the negative outcomes of social media communication, such as rumor (Goh et al., 2017; Hashimoto, Kuboyama, & Shiota, 2011; Kwon, Cha, Jung, Chen, & Wang, 2013; Ozturk, Li, & Sakamoto, 2015). However, we do not have enough understanding of how social media rumors are told persuasively. In this context, the present study aims to explore the junction of social media storytelling, social media rhetoric, and social media rumor.

This chapter bridges a few specific gaps. First, no particular study draws a tripartite relationship between storytelling, rhetoric, and rumor. Is a successful rumor a successful story also that should have rhetorical elements? No study answers this question. Second, the state of these three variables is studied separately on many occasions, such as digital/social media storytelling and digital/social media rhetoric. Most of these studies only focus on digital media in general, not on social media in particular. Also, the combined state of storytelling, rhetoric, and rumor in social media has not been discussed in any study. Third, the storytelling pattern and rhetorical use of social media rumor are yet to be discussed. Therefore, the present chapter covers a wide area to fill the knowledge gaps. However, it does not provide a concrete conceptual framework, but rather a brief overview of the storytelling and rhetoric of social media rumor.

The following discussions are divided into five sections. In the first section, a brief overview of storytelling and the specialties of social media storytelling are discussed. The second section attempts to connect rhetoric with storytelling and sketch the area of social media rhetoric. The third section deals with the features of rumor and propensities of social media rumor. In the fourth section, a holistic discussion on storytelling and rhetoric of social media rumor is presented based on three example cases. Finally, some concluding remarks are presented in the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Before discussing the nature of storytelling in social media in the digital age, at first, we need to understand what stories and storytelling are, and the stages of their historical development. A story is simply a narrative (Page, 2018). The definitions of “story” can be divided into two broader categories: from the core communication perspective and from the literary perspective. Conversational stories are every meaningful expression of human communication. Lambert (2012) states that stories are the communication elements through which we make sense of the world: from a three-word sentence to a novel. Fisher (1987) also views human communication from a narrative point of view. According to him, humans communicate through stories, human communication is nothing but the exchange of stories, the world is full of stories, and humans understand life through a series of stories. Fina (2016) thinks storytelling is one of the most common forms of discourse in human communication. Human interaction can often be mistakenly considered as the only type of information exchange. Scattered information without a structured body of narrative is not conducive to communication. So, individuals put contextualized

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