Principles, Legal Nature, and Elements of Civil Liability for the Spread of Rumors on Social Media

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Abstracts

This study examines the principles, legal nature, and elements of civil liability associated with the spread of rumors on social media, emphasizing their significant societal and individual impacts. Rumors exploit ambiguity and misinformation to undermine trust, destabilize public opinion, and threaten state security. Social media has amplified the reach of electronic rumors, transforming them into potent tools of psychological warfare. This research categorizes rumors into types such as creeping, impulsive, hate-driven, defamatory, terrorism-related, and politically and economically motivated, each with distinct characteristics and consequences. For instance, hate rumors incite sectarian conflicts, while political rumors manipulate public perception during crises, as seen in fabrications used to justify international conflicts. Economic rumors destabilize markets, causing panic and financial losses, while social rumors inflict psychological and reputational harm, often targeting individuals through defamation or blackmail. Social media platforms, while fostering communication, serve as breeding grounds for misinformation due to their global reach and lack of regulation. Islamic teachings provide a framework for addressing the dangers of rumors, highlighting their destructive consequences, from societal instability to moral erosion. The Quran explicitly prohibits rumor-mongering, emphasizing its role in spreading fear, distrust, and chaos. This study calls for adaptive legal frameworks and increased public awareness to combat the spread of false information, particularly in the digital age, where misinformation can propagate rapidly. By understanding the mechanisms and consequences of rumors, societies can develop effective strategies to mitigate their harm and preserve social stability, trust, and public order.

1. Introduction

The impact of rumors is undeniable, affecting both society and individuals alike. However, their impact on society, public opinion, and the state is far greater. This is due to the objectives pursued by those who spread rumors, which are often highly dangerous as they infringe on the independence and sovereignty of the state and its resources. This explains the growing attention given to rumors, as they create anonymous social pressure shrouded in ambiguity and vagueness. Rumors gain attention from large segments of society and are circulated not to convey information but rather to provoke and incite ideas, targeting the established convictions

of public opinion and the minds of recipients. Their propagation relies on the uncertainty and ambiguity of the news or event, as once the truth is revealed, rumors lose their ground.

Governments deal with such criminal behavior through various measures and procedures. Given the significant impact of rumors on public opinion and their consequences for society and civil peace, laws criminalize rumors as false information or a collection of false information that spreads quickly within society and is circulated among the public, who believe it to be true. These rumors are often intriguing and spark curiosity within society and researchers, lacking a reliable source to confirm their authenticity. Rumors are associated with disturbing public opinion, threatening the public security of the state, and undermining trust in its vital interests, such as its economy, currency, and internal security. The concept of false rumors often overlaps with defamation crimes, which involve attributing specific incidents to others. Against this backdrop, this study explores the following:

1. The Principles and Legal Nature of Civil Liability for the Spread of Rumors on Social Media

Rumors are among the most dangerous and destructive tools of psychological warfare. They infiltrate society in ways that resemble magic, as their sources are often difficult to identify. Victims often hear rumors from friends, giving them the appearance of credibility. In some cases, the victims themselves become the propagators of these rumors. Under no circumstances can rumors be dismissed as mere anomalies or curiosities, as their primary mechanism involves distorting memory, reinforcing oblivion, and fostering imagination and justification. These mechanisms are the same as those found in most forms of human communication.

Electronic rumors, in particular, are no longer just false news or fabricated information spread by an individual. Instead, they have evolved into something more complex, often orchestrated by specialized organizations and media outlets that manipulate information to destabilize and undermine the security and stability of a nation. Electronic rumors are especially prevalent during crises and wars, facilitated by the internet, which is one of the most powerful tools for spreading rumors among youth. Social media platforms allow anyone with an opinion or unverified information to disseminate it widely.

Rumors have become a weapon that evolves with societal and technological advancements. This necessitates studying them as one of the most prominent tools of psychological warfare in the age of the information and communication revolution. This era is characterized by the continuous and rapid growth of information, unrestricted freedom of information exchange, and ease of transmission, retrieval, and processing. These factors enhance the effectiveness and danger of rumors, which are no longer merely verbal exchanges but now include fabricated information transmitted via multimedia, such as images and videos.

The significant developments in Iran and Iraq across various dimensions have highlighted social media as a primary arena for rumor propagation. These rumors often coincide with current events and are commonly observed on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. They include fabricated photos and videos, false statements attributed to political figures and symbols, and the creation of unofficial pages in the name of state institutions, international news agencies, or satellite channels. Such practices lead to confusion, spread false news on

social media, and contribute to public disorder, chaos, and impacts on public opinion, state decisions, and political programs. Against this backdrop, this study examines the following:

2. Types of Rumors

Classifying rumors in a universally applicable manner is challenging, as no single framework can serve as a definitive guideline. The interest in the topic often depends on the story behind the rumor, its motives, time frame, or social impacts—whether harmful, beneficial, or neutral. By reviewing various academic classifications of rumors, they can be categorized as follows:

2.1 Creeping Rumors

Creeping rumors spread slowly, whispered among individuals, taking a long time to become widely known within society. These rumors often emerge in authoritarian societies or prisons, spreading in secrecy until eventually becoming known to everyone. Creeping rumors include hostile narratives targeting government officials or false stories aiming to hinder economic, political, or social progress. Propagators of such rumors continuously create an endless chain of stories, sustaining and spreading them over time. The primary reason for their slow spread is either the difficulty of social communication, the deliberate planning of the propagator, or the extreme implausibility of the rumor, which makes it harder for people to believe. These rumors are characterized by their slow, stealthy spread, making their danger harder to perceive as they propagate discreetly and gradually (Rockett, 1984, p. 72).

2.2 Violent or Impulsive Rumors

These rumors are characterized by their violent nature and rapid spread, covering large groups in a very short time. They rely on strong emotions and enthusiastic reactions to public incidents. Examples include rumors about disasters, victories, or defeats during wartime. Such rumors start with a high emotional charge, prompting immediate action. They provoke intense emotional responses, such as panic, anger, or sudden joy, which may lead to significant consequences or dissipate without effect once their momentum fades. Their rapid spread is primarily due to the importance of the rumor's subject matter, especially in the absence or shortage of official information to clarify the situation for the public. An example is the rumor surrounding the "Abu Tabar Gang" in the 1970s, which caused widespread panic in Iraq at the time (Al-Huqbani, 2003, p. 115; Allport, 1964, p. 321).

2.3 Submerged Rumors

These rumors surface during specific periods and then disappear, only to resurface when conditions allow. They are common in repetitive narratives that reappear during every war, often depicting the enemy's brutality against women and children. These can be termed "occasion-specific rumors," such as those that emerge among students during exam periods or in the lead-up to exam results. Submerged rumors often remain dormant in individuals' minds, only to resurface in similar circumstances to the original event. One prominent example is financial rumors, such as claims of government plans to seize citizens' bank deposits or foreign currency reserves (Simisim, 2000, pp. 158–159).

2.4 Hate Rumors

Hatred is an emotion that can drive individuals under its influence to spread rumors in a specific direction. For instance, personal animosity towards someone may lead individuals to spread falsehoods about them, or resentment from a group adversely affected by authority may incite the propagation of rumors targeting the authority and its policies. This type of rumor aims to foster hatred, hostility, and animosity, thereby harming individuals, groups, or even an entire society or state. Hate rumors are particularly alarming and harmful because they are often employed to incite sectarian conflicts within coexisting communities, targeting the emotional and naive among the populace to fragment social cohesion.

An example is the spread of rumors following the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. A rumor circulated that Sikh individuals who sought refuge in Hindu homes to escape the violence had killed their hosts, stolen their belongings, and assaulted their women before fleeing at night (Dentites, 1998, p. 109). The purpose of this rumor was to exacerbate hatred towards Sikhs and sow distrust, leading to violent acts such as Hindu mobs dragging Sikhs from trains and beating them to death. This type of rumor is one of the most dangerous and destructive, aiming to tear apart the unity of a nation, undermine its morale during wartime, and create divisions between various entities such as governments and citizens, leaders and subordinates, or different sects of the populace.

To combat such rumors effectively, legislators must adopt modern methods that keep pace with technological advancements, which have made the spread of these rumors easier and more pervasive (Al-Harbi, 2013, p. 84).

2.5. Defamatory Rumors

Defamatory rumors center on individuals, whether they are celebrities or ordinary people. These rumors often distort relationships, such as friendships or professional ties, into exaggerated narratives of romantic or illicit relationships. The details are often fabricated and sensationalized, making them highly susceptible to rapid dissemination. These rumors stem from both positive and negative psychological motives of those who propagate them, and they have devastating effects on the lives and futures of individuals.

The primary aim of such rumors is defamation and slander, often used as a tool to achieve specific goals, such as discrediting individuals with differing ideologies. For example, British Prime Minister John Major filed a defamation lawsuit against the magazines Stateman and Society for spreading rumors alleging his romantic involvement with a woman.

In modern times, the widespread use of social media and the lack of awareness among some users have turned these platforms into tools for defamation, attacking the honor and dignity of individuals (Al-Qallali, 1984, p. 134).

2.6. Terrorism Rumors

Terrorism rumors are psychological weapons used by terrorists to instill fear through threats and false information. Their objective is to weaken the morale of their targets, destabilize

security, and undermine public confidence in the government, especially during crises. These rumors spread rapidly among large groups, fueled by strong emotions and panic.

An example of such a rumor is the tragedy of the Imam Bridge in Baghdad on August 31, 2005. During a religious pilgrimage, a rumor spread that a suicide bomber was planning to detonate on the crowded bridge. The ensuing panic caused a deadly stampede, resulting in the death of 1,200 people, including women and children (Maluki, 1980, p. 128). This catastrophic incident underscores the destructive potential of terrorism rumors and the need for effective strategies to counteract them.

2.7. Optimistic Rumors

Optimistic rumors spread false yet hopeful information, such as claims about the imminent end of a war due to a shortage of enemy resources. These rumors aim to uplift spirits temporarily, often masking deeper issues.

2.8. Fear-Inducing Rumors

Fear-inducing rumors aim to instill terror among the public, such as claims of imminent destructive attacks by an enemy. These rumors are highly prevalent, accounting for 90% of rumors in certain contexts, such as product-related rumors. For instance, after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina, fear-inducing rumors about subsequent disasters spread rapidly, as noted by Difonzo and Bordia (Alport, 1964, p. 58).

2.9. Stereotyping Rumors

Stereotyping rumors aim to create negative perceptions about a particular group, religion, or ethnicity. Examples include the targeting of Italian-Americans during World War II or the current targeting of Muslims in Europe and the United States, labeling them as terrorists. These rumors disrupt social cohesion and national unity, often referred to as "wedge-driving rumors."

2.10. Creeping Rumors

Creeping rumors grow slowly, spreading among a small group before reaching a larger audience after undergoing various distortions. For example, rumors surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear disaster spread slowly at first, then gained momentum, fueled by fear and uncertainty (Omar, 2004, p. 168).

2.11. Submerged Rumors

Submerged rumors emerge under specific conditions and resurface when similar circumstances arise. For example, rumors about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction appeared during the Gulf War and resurfaced before the 2003 Iraq invasion, despite a lack of evidence (Rashti, 1978, p. 56).

2.12. Media Rumors

In the age of technological advancements, media rumors have become one of the most dangerous forms of misinformation. They are often crafted by specialized entities and disseminated through modern communication tools, such as social media and news outlets, to

achieve specific objectives. Media rumors rely on manipulative techniques, such as misusing images, citing anonymous sources, and exaggerating events, leading to widespread misinformation (Al-Ghamari, 1999, p. 7).

These rumors exploit the lack of verification in digital communication, turning media platforms into tools for spreading harmful rumors, defaming individuals, and undermining societal stability.

2.13. Electronic Rumors

Technology, initially developed to provide the latest and most accurate information to facilitate sound decision-making and enrich discussions, has paradoxically led to a sense of losing control over information dissemination. Modern communication tools, particularly the internet, have become indispensable for staying updated and connected. However, this same medium has also facilitated the spread of malicious electronic rumors.

Electronic rumors are a destructive form of communication that exploits modern technological platforms to propagate falsehoods. These rumors may contain a grain of truth, exaggerated or downplayed, or be entirely fabricated. They often become a topic of discussion and interaction within virtual communities, eventually spreading to real-world societies. The individuals behind these electronic rumors typically possess advanced technical skills, often intersecting with cybercrimes such as hacking into websites to access and falsify information for unlawful use. These falsified data points often become the substance of rumors shared both verbally and electronically. Electronic rumors are classified as crimes punishable by law due to their severe consequences (Al-Shishri, 2001, p. 273).

2.14. Political Rumors

The political sphere is one of the most significant domains for rumors. Domestically, political rumors frequently involve speculation about government dismissals, cabinet reshuffles, or the appointment of new ministers. They often gain momentum during transitions in government, with rumors about who might assume key roles. Additionally, they may target politicians and their families, spreading false accusations about financial improprieties or abuse of power, thus undermining trust in public figures and institutions.

In foreign politics, rumors are used as psychological warfare. For instance, during the Battle of Uhud, Abu Sufyan spread a rumor about the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) after the martyrdom of Mus'ab ibn Umair. This created chaos among the Muslim ranks, causing some to abandon their weapons and others to flee to Medina. However, the Prophet's appearance on the mountain refuted the rumor and restored the Muslims' morale. This example demonstrates how propagators of rumors strategically select critical moments to ensure rapid dissemination and make containment difficult.

Predictive rumors are another subset of political rumors, often used during crises to forecast military or political events. For example, the United States propagated rumors about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, which later proved false. However, these rumors served as a pretext for the invasion of Iraq, resulting in the country's destruction and the sowing of division (Akhil, 2015, p. 76).

2.15. Economic Rumors

Economic rumors aim to create anxiety and confusion in financial markets. They are no less significant than political rumors and can lead to serious consequences such as the devaluation of assets, bankruptcy of companies, or destabilization of markets. For instance, the British market suffered greatly during the spread of rumors about mad cow disease, which led to a prolonged boycott despite remedial measures.

Economic rumors are often spread by traders or businesspersons seeking short-term profits. For example, rumors about the imminent price hike or shortage of specific commodities can drive panic buying, leading to artificial scarcity and inflated prices. These rumors undermine economic security by causing public anxiety, such as rumors about the collapse of national currencies, which can lead to mass withdrawals of funds or emigration (Al-Juhani, 2001, p. 226).

2.16. Social Rumors

Social rumors often target individuals, spreading news about them, and frequently involve defamation. Observing social media today reveals that defamation has become one of the most prevalent issues, with numerous platforms specifically designed to damage individuals' reputations. Defamation by exposing someone's flaws is a condemned act, particularly when the accused is innocent of the allegations.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated, as narrated by Abu al-Darda: "If any man spreads a rumor about a Muslim man, accusing him of something he is innocent of, Allah will punish him in Hellfire on the Day of Judgment until he makes amends" (cited in Abdullah, 2001, p. 197). Social rumors also encompass threats and blackmail, which are among the most dangerous crimes perpetrated on social media. In these cases, the perpetrator may threaten the victim with publishing false news or fabricated images unless a ransom is paid.

The misuse of social media often results in the dissemination of false images or fabricated stories, causing significant psychological and social harm to individuals and families. This can lead to issues such as divorce or familial disputes.

Another form of social rumor involves charlatans and fraudsters who use deceptive practices to promote baseless claims. For instance, they may spread stories suggesting that a particular person can cure illnesses or solve problems, targeting uneducated and vulnerable groups. This type of rumor is often spread in environments characterized by ignorance.

Religious rumors, another subset of social rumors, include the dissemination of false religious teachings, fabricated sayings, or unverified narratives under the guise of Islamic principles. These rumors often gain traction on social media platforms, with frequent repetition leading people to mistakenly believe in their authenticity (Al-Harthi, 2001, p. 76).

The Role of the Internet and Social Media

In modern society, the internet and social media platforms are double-edged swords. On the positive side, they facilitate global communication by eliminating physical distances and saving

time. On the negative side, they provide a platform for emotionally and intellectually immature individuals to exploit these tools for purposes contrary to religion, morality, ethics, and law.

Social media rumors play a significant role in influencing individuals' psychological states, particularly politicians and decision-makers, while also impacting public opinion, governmental institutions, and security agencies. Social media has thus become an adversarial medium. While Islamic jurisprudence permits expressing opinions on these platforms, such practices must be bounded by Islamic law to prevent harm to individuals and society.

Social Rumors in Islamic Teachings

Islam has addressed the severe harm caused by rumors, highlighting their destructive impact on Muslim society in various contexts—whether in warfare, social stability, or public security. The Quran explicitly warns against rumor-mongering, labeling it as a grave sin.

In the context of warfare, the mischief of the disbelievers and their use of rumors for psychological warfare are well-documented. During the Battle of Uhud, the polytheists of Quraysh spread rumors against the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his mission, aiming to create confusion and disorder among the Muslim ranks. One notable rumor falsely claimed the battle had ended, leading to disarray and the martyrdom of many Muslim archers (Al-Sharfi, 2001, p. 141).

Rumors reaching the public sphere are often categorized as "fabrications" (arajif), a term that, according to Islamic principles, indicates a severe transgression warranting punishment. The Quran addresses this in multiple verses, including Surah Al-Ahzab (33:60), where it states: "Indeed, if the hypocrites and those in whose hearts is disease and those who spread rumors in Medina do not cease, We will surely incite you against them; then they will not remain your neighbors therein except for a little while."

Quranic Perspective on the Harm of Rumors

1.   Causing Apostasy: Rumors can lead those with weak faith to apostasy, disbelief, and polytheism (Surah Al-Imran, 3:144).

2.   Destabilizing Society: Rumors create anxiety and deprive communities of peace and tranquility (Surah An-Nisa, 4:83; Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:60).

3.   Defeat: Rumors can weaken the morale of warriors, leading to defeat in the battlefield (Surah Al-Imran, 3:144).

4.   Defamation: Promoting immorality and desiring its spread among people is considered a significant sin, tarnishing the reputation of believers (Surah An-Nur, 24:19).

Islam strictly prohibits the spread of rumors, considering them sinful and detrimental to the fabric of society. Surah An-Nur (24:11-19) condemns such actions, emphasizing that any form of rumor-mongering is a serious offense.

The Concept of Arajif

Rumors classified as arajif in the Quran are defined as falsehoods meant to disturb and destabilize. Al-Tabarsi, in his exegesis, explains the root of "arjaf" as "shaking" or "unrest," likening its effects to the trembling caused by waves in the sea. In the Quranic context, "arjaf" refers to the dissemination of falsehoods and untruths that unsettle hearts and spread panic within the community.

2. Conclusion

This study highlights the profound societal, psychological, and legal implications of rumors, particularly in the age of social media and rapid technological advancements. Rumors, whether creeping, impulsive, hate-driven, defamatory, or economically and politically motivated, pose severe threats to social stability, public trust, and national security. They exploit ambiguity and misinformation, targeting individuals, communities, and institutions with devastating consequences. Modern communication platforms, while facilitating connectivity and information exchange, have also become powerful tools for the rapid propagation of harmful rumors, often blurring the lines between truth and falsehood.

The legal framework surrounding civil liability for rumor propagation underscores the necessity of holding individuals and entities accountable for spreading false information. Additionally, this study emphasizes the role of Islamic jurisprudence in addressing the ethical and moral dimensions of rumor-mongering, categorizing it as a grave sin with wide-reaching societal harms. The Quranic prohibition of "arjif" reflects the importance of combating misinformation to maintain societal harmony and trust.

To mitigate the spread of rumors, it is essential to enhance public awareness, foster critical thinking, and implement adaptive legal and regulatory measures that keep pace with technological advancements. Governments, communities, and individuals must collaborate to counteract the detrimental effects of rumors, ensuring that the digital age does not compromise societal stability and moral integrity. By understanding the mechanisms and impacts of rumors, this study provides a foundation for developing effective strategies to combat their spread and foster a more informed and resilient society.

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