

# *Public Voices*

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**Volume XVII**

**Number 2**

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## Publisher

*Public Voices* is published by the National Center for Public Performance (NCPD) at the Institute for Public Service, Suffolk University.  
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## Front Cover

*Vaccinating the Poor.* Wood Engraving by Sol Eytinge Jr., 1873. Images from the History of Medicine (IHM) Collection, NIH National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, MD,  
<http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101392773>.

Abstract: *A group of men, women, and children, black and white, observe a physician as he vaccinates the tattooed left arm of a burly young man.*

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ASPA  
C/o SunTrust Bank  
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Washington, DC 20042-0041

*Public Voices* (Online)  
ISSN 2573-1440

*Public Voices* (Print)  
ISSN 1072-5660

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Current-day public managers are aware of both the public relations benefits and problems of social media. Instant communication can help managers implement their agency's mission. Yet social media can be an ongoing problem by generating misinformation, false claims, and fake news. When facing deleterious rumors, what is the best PR response: Deny? Refute? Ignore? These dilemmas are, in principle, parallel to what federal agencies faced during World War II. This historical study examines how administrators struggled to develop PR strategies to deal with rumors during the war. There was no widely accepted one-size-fits-all policy. Different agencies tried to suppress them, rebut them, or smother them with counter-information. While history never repeats itself exactly, this historical case study conveys potentially relevant lessons regarding the continuing dilemma that public managers nowadays face about rumors and fake news. To respond or not to respond, that is the question.

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# **Before Fake News: How Federal Agencies Wrestled with Responding to Rumors in World War II**

*Mordecai Lee*

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## **Introduction: Public Administration and Rumors, Then and Now**

Rumors are part of life. However, with the emergence of social media, rumors are no longer limited to whispers moving slowly from one person to another. Now they can go viral globally in a matter of minutes. Sometimes rumors end up being true, but just as many likely are false. The 2020s seemed to embody ever-higher levels of rumor-based public conversation, particularly about the COVID-19 pandemic and claims of the 2020 presidential election was stolen. President Trump's frequent claims of fake news often included assertions of alternate facts, something of a modern synonym for rumors. This pattern of behavior, that seemed to metastasize over time, undermining what was factual and what not, giving seemingly equal credibility to rumors and 'alternate facts' he repeatedly asserted regardless of circumstances (Goodsell 2019, 872; T. Lee 2019; Gaozhao 2021).

There is an overlap between the traditional concept of rumors and the relatively new phenomenon of fake news claims. Both are likely to be a mixture of false information along with a nugget of truth. It is often hard to unweave those two strands. The emergence of media features to deal with this include Snopes, FactCheck.org, the *Washington Post's* designation of the number of Pinocchios a claim deserves, and the *New York Times'* fact-checking. They all highlight not only the frequent need for a binary true-false judgment, but often the need to assess the degree of the mix between true and false, by using such categories as partly true and partly false.

The growth of social media has also made it easier for organizational leaders in all sectors of the political economy to become aware of rumors and assertions of fake news. Now, it is possible to learn quickly the specifics of what is being claimed, and then to decide promptly on a response strategy. The obvious choices include a denial, a clarification of what is true and what isn't, a decision not to respond publicly, or a decision to try to smother the rumor or fake news report with information serving as an implicit refutation. (Another alternative limited to law enforcement and criminal justice agencies regarding investigations is a justifiable "neither confirm nor deny.")

Business corporations and nonprofits can usually be relatively agile in confronting rumors and fake news and then deciding on a response strategy. On the other hand, in public administration, government agencies often are constrained by multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives, stakeholders, legal restrictions, and overseers. As Sayre quipped in the 1950s, “business and public administration are alike only in all unimportant respects” (1958, 245). Much more recently, Bannister identified 19 important characteristics that distinguish e-government from its counterpart activity in the business sector (2010, 42). How should today’s public administrators respond to rumors and fake news? History can help. This inquiry tries to draw lessons from the experiences of federal agencies in WWII when rumors abounded. Even though today’s media and technology are enormously different from the 1940s, there can be value to examining history for potential lessons. Indeed, while today’s communications environment is based on new tools, it is at heart not new territory. Looking back can help us look ahead.

This historical case study examines how public administrators struggled to develop PR strategies to deal with rumors in World War II. At the time, there was no widely accepted formula, let alone across-the-board conventional wisdom. Different federal agencies variously tried to suppress rumors, smother them with counter-information, or rebut them. During the war, mass communication was largely limited to print and radio, making it harder than today to locate and hear rumors, harder to assess them, and harder to decide how to react. Nonetheless, like today, agencies had three basic options, none particularly appealing. First, they could ignore a rumor and hope it would die out of its own accord and not do too much damage. Second, they could publicly deny it with a factual counter-version. However, doing that might have the effect of further spreading the original rumor and giving it new life. Third, they could try to set the record straight without reference to the rumor itself. This would only be effective if the audience on their own made the link between the new information and the rumor. (The fourth option, used in law enforcement and criminal justice, is to neither confirm nor deny rumors about investigations. However, this approach is not applicable to public administration in fields outside of law enforcement and investigations. Therefore, it is not discussed in this case study.)

History can contribute to the public administration literature in two ways. First, as so-called “pure history” or “history as history,” it is valuable for its own sake by filling in missing gaps in the literature. Gibson and Stolcis noted that public administration pedagogy often relegates “the history of public administration to the dusty backbench of the discipline’s historical structure” (2006, 67). Lee called for revitalizing public administration history, arguing that the absence of historical knowledge can lead to “an inaccurate sense of modern practice occurring in a vacuum, even of newness, which can be quite inaccurate. Therefore, historical knowledge can help contemporary researchers by adding perspective and context to the subjects being examined” (M. Lee 2021, 1008). Given that little has been published on this particular subject, this reconstruction of a relatively unknown story adds to public administration history and knowledge.

Second, even though history never repeats itself exactly, lessons from the past can suggest some general applicability to the present. While not providing explicit and detailed applied guidance for managers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this WWII history examines the options and dilemmas that public administrators faced regarding rumors and fake news. This approach was exemplified by Goodsell’s case study of the early New Deal and the lessons for the federal response to Covid (2020). As an exploratory case study, this inquiry identifies some potential applied knowledge for

managers in a time of social media, fake news, and omnipresent rumors. Notwithstanding the enormous changes in communications technology and American society, the inherent alternatives for rumor and fake news counterstrategy remain largely the same as what confronted wartime public administrators. To respond or not to respond, that is the question.

## Literature Review, Methodology, and Structure

WWII spawned seminal academic and practitioner literature on rumors. Originating in social psychology, Harvard's Gordon Allport was one of the first to research rumors during the war, including encouraging creation of local rumor clinics and a recurring rumor column in the *Boston Herald* (McCormick 1942; "Rumor Clinic" 1942; G. Allport & Murray 1943; G. Allport & Postman 1947). His work encouraged others during and after the war (F. Allport & Lepkin 1945; Knapp 1944).

Since then, rumor research splayed out to other disciplines including public relations, corporate marketing, brand management, history, public health, law, and business administration. Twenty-first-century book-length scholarship has been extensive, including a history of three 1950s federal officials who focused on gossip for their reputations (Elias 2021), vaccinations, and public health (Larson 2020; J. Lee 2014; Kitta 2012), rumor control efforts in the 1960s urban riots (Young, Pinkerton & Dodds 2014), internet-based rumors in Asia (Dalziel 2013), difficulty dealing with rumors (Sunstein 2009), reputational impacts (Solove 2007), psychology-based social and organizational approaches (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007), behavioral finance (Schindler 2007), and a how-to guide for business managers (Kimmel 2004).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literature relevant to American public administration and rumors have come from a variety of disciplines, but overall have been modest. It includes political science, history, public relations, and communications (Bowen and Lovari 2022, 190-93; Alaimo 2022, 130; Sparrow 2015; 2011, 84-89; Faye 2007). A few international academics have also recently published research relating to rumors and public administration, including municipal administration in an Indonesian city and how government agencies in Arab and Muslim countries should combat electronic rumors (Susanti, Rahmanto, and Wijaya 2022; Hindawy 2021).

In public administration history, just before WWII, McCamy argued that agencies had the obligation to respond to attacks (impliedly including malicious rumors) by issuing "counter releases" to the press and "counter messages" through radio and pamphlets (1939, 307). During the war, Friedrich urged agencies to pay attention to rumors, but he presciently noted the fixed dilemma for public administrators because "rigid rules for such strategy cannot be formulated, because the strategy needs to be shaped in the light of the total situation" (1943, 83).

The research methodology for this historical case study relied on triangulation, a mainstream historical research technique recommended by McNabb for political science (2021, 280, 366). Similarly, the methodological literature on conducting case studies in public administration also recommends triangulation as a research approach (Graham 2011, 13; Luton 2010, 135). The benefit of such a methodology is identifying several independent primary sources. In this case study, these sources have been archival collections, contemporaneous official federal publications, and

contemporaneous media coverage. Using these three independent historical sources facilitated constructing a balanced account of how agencies combated rumors.

The main archival source was the World War II Rumor Project at the Library of Congress (2022, henceforth Rumor Archive). Other archival sources included the Special Collections at Northwestern University, Archives of Vassar College, FDR Presidential Library, and University of Tennessee-Knoxville Special Collections. For official government documents used as sources, most federal publications were located in library collections via WorldCat/OCLC. Some were formally published by the US Government Printing Office, while others were mostly mimeograph publications issued directly by federal agencies. Media coverage came from the historical online databases of ProQuest Historical Newspapers, NewspaperArchive.com, and the Library of Congress's website "Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers." When helpful, a few secondary sources were used to buttress the narrative.

The historical context for studying anti-rumor strategies in WWII is the record of the federal government during World War I. According to Hamilton, "unfounded rumors vexed the [federal] government" during (what was called) the Great War (2020, 200). In response, President Wilson signed an executive order creating the Committee on Public Information (CPI). CPI claimed that *all* anti-war rumors circulating in the US originated with German agents. The agency also sought to stomp out legitimate criticism of the government's war effort as disloyal and unpatriotic (ibid, 200-201). While CPI sometimes published pamphlets repeating the rumors and then rebutting them (CPI 1918a), it mostly focused on trying to stop them by urging citizens who were told a rumor to turn to the rumor spreader by asking, "Where did you get your facts?" (CPI 1918b). CPI was the most relevant precedent for the federal government to determine anti-rumor strategies during WWII.

The structure of the case study begins with FDR's leadership vis-à-vis wartime rumors. Then it follows in chronological order the efforts by executive branch-wide agencies to develop a consistent and comprehensive strategy for dealing with wartime rumors. Their work can be considered a horizontal approach for an across-the-board federal policy. That is followed by an examination of the counterpart anti-rumor strategies of several key agencies that were particularly impacted by wartime rumors. As vertical siloes within the executive branch, they faced more pointed and individualistic dilemmas created by rumors related to their specific field of activity. The presentation about those agencies is in rough chronological order but, by necessity, sometimes overlapping.

### **President Roosevelt's Personal Attempts to Deal with Rumors in WWII**

FDR had experienced CPI's work as assistant secretary of the Navy during WWI. As president, Roosevelt repeatedly tried to discourage wartime rumors but without being quite as heavy-handed, accusatory, and propagandistic as CPI. At a press conference in February 1942, he sharply criticized rumormongers in the capital. This city "is the worst rumor factory, and therefore the source of more lies that are spoken and printed throughout the United States" (Roosevelt 1972, 19:148). The next week, in a radio fireside chat, he faced the subject head-on:

You and I have the utmost contempt for Americans who, since Pearl Harbor, have whispered or announced 'off the record' that there was no longer any Pacific Fleet – that the fleet was all sunk or destroyed on December 7 – that more than a thousand of our planes were destroyed on the ground. They have suggested slyly that the Government has withheld the truth about casualties – that eleven or twelve thousand men were killed at Pearl Harbor instead of the figures as officially announced. They have even served the enemy propagandists by spreading the incredible story that shiploads of bodies of our honored American dead were about to arrive in New York Harbor to be put into a common grave. (Roosevelt 1969, 1942:111)

During the war, the subject continued to come up in press conferences. For example, in 1943 he lashed out at the news media for coverage that was a mix of facts, rumors, guesswork, insinuations, and innuendo (Roosevelt 1972, 22:105-112). In reaction to the Battle of the Bulge, FDR somewhat echoed CPI's aggressive stance about rumors originating from America's enemies. In a radio talk in January 1945, he said:

I would express a most serious warning against the poisonous effects of enemy propaganda. ... Every little rumor which is intended to weaken our faith in our Allies is like an actual enemy agent in our midst – seeking to sabotage our war effort. There are, here and there, evil and baseless rumors against the Russians – rumors against the British – rumors against our own American commanders in the field. When you examine these rumors closely, you will observe that every one of them bears the same trademark – "Made in Germany." We must resist this propaganda – we must destroy it – with the same strength and the same determination that our fighting men are displaying as they resist and destroy the panzer divisions. (Roosevelt 1969, 1944-45:508-509)

### **Struggling to Develop a Whole-of-Government Anti-Rumor Strategy: The Office of Facts and Figures, 1941-1942**

Criticisms of Roosevelt, especially from conservatives, often framed the pre-Pearl Harbor production mobilization (and, later, the war effort) as "the mess in Washington." They claimed FDR was bungling the management of these efforts. They produced a continuous stream of accusations and innuendo and were often reported by the mainstream media as straight news. After all, if a US Senator or leading industrialist said it, then surely it was newsworthy.

During the pre-war national defense mobilization, Roosevelt created the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF). Its ostensible mission was to reduce the confusion of seemingly conflicting production statistics released by a multiplicity of federal agencies involved in that effort. Headed by Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish, OFF staff comprised "one of the most erudite groups in Washington – was handpicked and noted for intelligence, integrity, and ability" (Weinberg 1968, 75). In a sense, OFF was an opposite-world CPI, seeking to deal with rumors from a more positive, fact-based, and high-end perspective than CPI's near-hysterical and suppressive approach.

OFF's Bureau of Intelligence (BOI) focus included "to know whether there are forces at work in the community which may disrupt public confidence and how such forces may be counteracted."

This included monitoring “the effect of enemy propaganda” and “how the public is being informed or misinformed” (Kane 1942a, 215). A small Rumor Study Unit was eventually created deep in the Bureau’s org chart, within the Area Studies Section of the Special Services Division. “It catalogs rumors reported from all parts of the country on the basis of their psychological motivation and their subject matter. Since rumors stem, in large measure, from ignorance, hostility, and anxiety, a measurement of their growth provides rough clues to the spheres in which informational efforts are needed” (Barth 1943, 73).

A month after Pearl Harbor, MacLeish was concerned that “one of the favorite propaganda tactics of the enemy is to broadcast exaggerated rumors partly to spread confusion and consternation and partly to force denials and thus receive information as to the location of forces.” He favored a relatively soft response to rumors: “As soon as the facts can be told without aiding the enemy, they will be announced officially” (OFF 1942a, 56). With that approach, the release of information did not have to include repeating the rumor or even noting the implicit focus of knocking it down. A reporter depicted this approach as “how these channels are used by the enemy, and where further information is needed” (“Strategy of Truth,” 1942).

One of OFF’s early use of wartime polling was a January 1942 survey focused on citizens’ views of how the government should handle war news. About half preferred that war news come from official government spokespersons rather than unfettered news media. One of their major reasons was because they wanted “to get rid of speculations, false rumors, personal viewpoints, sensationalism, [and] propaganda from newspapers and radio” (OFF 1942b, 9). However, another poll in March stated, “Almost half of the people felt that the news which the Government does release is an *inaccurate* picture of the true situation,” hence making them open to non-governmental sources of information (OFF 1942c, emphasis in original). OFF began using posters to convey the importance of staying mum about the war. A February poster stated, “The Enemy is listening. He wants to know what you know. Keep it to yourself” (“Enemy is listening,” 1942). This and subsequent posters weren’t explicitly about rumormongering, but the underlying message included tamping down on repeating rumors.

In March, OFF released a report on Nazi propaganda that was successfully seeping into circulation through rumors and even irresponsible media coverage. It described the goal of Nazi propaganda as one of “divide and conquer,” trying to repeat its success at demoralizing France before attacking it. Now, those tactics were aimed at Americans. “With this strategy of deceit, Hitler succeeded in duping many loyal Americans. Many rumors, all of them false, were spread throughout the country. ... According to rumors, maneuvers were being held in localities so infested with rattlesnakes that thousands of soldiers were dying of snake bites. ... German short-wave [radio] stories of losses at Pearl Harbor, for example, gave the signal for the Hitler agents to spread rumors that we had lost our fleet, and that our naval officials were traitors” (OFF 1942d, 13-14).

Within the Intelligence Bureau, there was a vague consensus that somebody in the national government ought to be doing something about rumors. But who and what exactly? OFF, the US Office of Education (in the Federal Security Agency), and the Psychology Division of the Office of Coordinator of Information drafted a report titled “A Project for the Analysis of Rumors.” The idea was a coordinated program to deal with rumors and would include a federally approved national network of 25 rumor clinics, each affiliated with a local university. The latter qualification

was partly to promote a relatively systematic and academically respectable approach to collecting and responding to rumors. However, OFF quickly had second thoughts. Receiving incoming reports from the field on rumors seemed like a good enough idea (Faye 2007). But then what? OFF was leery of committing to a reciprocal stage by “which material is to be sent back to the clinics for local dissemination” (DuBois, 1942).

Instead, OFF leaned toward a more centralized process of deciding what outgoing information to counteract rumors should be released and generally controlling it every step after receiving field reports. By late February, OFF was getting very cold feet on the tri-agency project. In a frank letter to the Education Commissioner, MacLeish said he now realized the premise of the local college-affiliated rumor clinics included that they “would be making and publicizing their own analyses of some of the rumors they come upon.” He feared such activities would lead to “public discussion without centralized control [and] would tend to spread rumors rather than kill them.” Therefore, he opposed further implementing the plan without additional examination (MacLeish 1942).

Gradually OFF developed a “catch and kill” rumor strategy (Kane 1942b). First, it should seek to gather intelligence from the field about rumors circulating around the country with an emphasis on limiting reporting to field staff of federal agencies, presumably more reliable, disciplined, and professional than rank-and-file citizens. Second, it should filter reports to identify rumors that appeared to be in wide circulation as opposed to the odd local rumor. Third, OFF should not support independent local efforts by rumor clinics, newspapers, and universities to *counteract* rumors. Fourth, OFF itself should not directly counteract a rumor because that would amplify the rumor further. Instead, working with the news media, it should seek indirectly to smother a rumor by flooding the news with information impliedly refuting it (Shils 1942). Fifth, there would probably be a need for continuing generic public service campaigns to discourage citizens from repeating rumors to others.

On June 10, BOI head Kane replied to an inquiry from the Westinghouse radio network. It had notified him of some damaging rumors circulating at a GE plant in Fort Wayne (IN). Should it air any programming to counteract the rumors? Kane discouraged the network executive from doing that because it would “increase the circulation of the rumor [rather] than neutralize it.” Instead, he suggested one-on-one personal conversations between those circulating the rumors and those knowing it was false (Kane 1942c).

Three days later, FDR terminated OFF’s existence. He created the Office of War Information (OWI) by amalgamating OFF, the Office of Government Reports, the Division of Information in the Office for Emergency Management, and parts of the Coordinator of Information. Now, a formal government-wide policy on rumors would have to begin all over again.

### **Struggling to Develop a Whole-of-Government Anti-Rumor Strategy: The Office of War Information, 1942-1943**

FDR appointed Elmer Davis, a popular radio news commentator to head of OWI. BOI’s Kane sought to jumpstart the languishing rumor project by requesting a comprehensive report “on [the] nature and prevalence of rumors” (Katz 1942a). Eugene Horowitz, a carryover staffer from OFF

was tapped to head the effort. Horowitz was a social psychologist with a Ph.D. from Columbia (US House 1943, 917). As an academic, he sought an organized, data-based research approach to undergird any potential policy on rumors. For example, BOI needed to define what a rumor was (and was not) before any field collections of rumors. Thinking ahead about what BOI staff would actually *do* with any information it collected, he suggested what would now be called beta testing before any broad-scale effort (Horowitz 1942).

The first wave of field reports for a two-week period in August flooded Horowitz with about 3,000 rumors. They came from “rumor wardens” selected by staffers in OWI’s 31 field offices and from 150 local offices of FSA (such as Social Security branch offices). Some relatively common and recurring rumors were anti-British, anti-Semitic, and anti-Black. The latter included a rumor that was so prevalent in the South that it became the subject of media coverage: the supposed existence of Eleanor Clubs. These were allegedly African American women employed as domestics who were supposedly encouraged by the First Lady to organize and escape their artificially low pay and limited economic prospects. With the wartime labor shortage, domestics allegedly had leverage to insist on pay raises or quitting for better-paying war work (Campbell 2020, 148). Davis denounced the rumor and, after an investigation, the FBI could not document it (“Lauds 4 editors,” 1942; “First Lady says,” 1942). An OWI field staffer in Virginia felt “the shoe was on the wrong foot – if anybody needed protection it was not the white people, but the Negroes needed protection from the whites” (Stevens 1942).

Besides the broad scope of these field reports, BOI also arranged an in-depth open-ended survey of public opinion in New Brunswick (NJ) and Portland (ME), both relatively small towns dwarfed by large military installations (OWI 1942e). The reality of dealing with this much data was daunting. During September, Horowitz and colleagues tried their social science best to draw conclusions from the tsunami of information they received. Finally, on September 30, BOI issued *Rumors in Wartime*, a confidential report to several hundred people inside the executive branch. Skipping the difficulty of a uniform and universal definition of a rumor, the report presented a typology of rumors: hostility (i.e., prejudice), anxiety, and escape. As a broad generalization, rumor spreaders were more likely to be citizens who were well-informed and had many social contacts rather than those lower on the socio-economic scale. Generally, Americans believed about 70% of the rumors they heard (OWI 1942a). Confronting the assumption that many rumors came from enemy propaganda, the report admitted to an overlap between rumors and enemy propaganda. But it emphasized that “there is no conclusive evidence to prove that rumors circulating in America had enemy inspiration” (p. 15). The report concluded:

Rumor denial, while of some value in combatting rumors of a local nature, seems an inadequate means of meeting the problem as a whole. Such underlying psychological factors as tension and prejudice cannot be removed through direct negation. Positive information designed to overcome the tension and prejudice stands a better chance of minimizing rumor than authoritative rebuttals of the rumors themselves. Local campaigns to counteract rumors have a limited usefulness. There is a danger that they may, if carelessly directed, spread the rumors which they seek to scotch. They need careful supervision and coordination with federal policy. (pp. 17-18)

Kane sent copy #1 to FDR (1942d). Evidently based on a leak, a story in early October said OWI “has uncovered an amazing anti-war ‘rumor factory’ ... Officials say they are ‘amazed’ and ‘astounded’.” The reporter had a relatively good source, correctly saying that OWI was preparing an internal report and that it was considering asking the news media “to help refute enormous lies founded on half-truths” (Weller 1942).

BOI’s next step was to invite a couple more rounds of rumor warden reports. At this point, Leo Rosten, an assistant director of OWI’s Domestic Branch (including BOI), got involved. He was at the agency’s “policy level” (Katz 1942b), making him high enough in the hierarchy to decide an authoritative rumor policy. Rosten was an unorthodox figure. He had a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago and had been on the staff of the President’s Committee on Administrative Management (aka the Brownlow Committee). His dissertation was a social science-based study of the capital’s press corps. He then moved to Los Angeles and did the same for Hollywood. Both books successfully straddled the line between popular and academic audiences. From there he dabbled in screenwriting and light fiction such as “The Education of Hyman Kaplan.” In the run-up to WWII, he worked for the federal Division of Information and then OFF liaising with Hollywood studios (“Job of clarifying war,” 1942). He encouraged the industry to produce feature films, documentaries, and shorts that promoted national morale. Moving with OFF to OWI, he had a broad portfolio for domestic communication.

In a series of meetings with Horowitz and other BOI staff in October, Rosten developed a firm OWI rumor policy. He wanted to discourage local rumor clinics while encouraging national magazines to write about rumors without repeating any specifics. The rumor control unit then developed a packet to reply to inquiries from a newspaper, civic group, or local unit of government about creating a rumor clinic. Slyly, it included a “Questionnaire for Local Rumor Control Projects” with 30 highly detailed questions on the project’s sponsorship, supervision, community representation, expert consultants, research staff, field reporters, and finances. Along with the questionnaire, came a diagram of a “Model” organization chart. It was complicated, with 15 lines and arrows indicating how the flow of information would be expected to be structured (OWI 1942b). OWI stated that when it received a *completed* questionnaire, it would then send a working guide for use in the day-to-day operations of the local rumor clinic. In reality, it was creating so high a hurdle as to prevent virtually everyone. When the monthly magazine of the Jewish War Veterans published a story about creating local rumor clinics, it included this unambiguous guidance from OWI:

**Caution:** Before any newspaper starts a “Rumor Clinic” it might be well to communicate with the Office of War Information, who have a questionnaire and some advice on the conduct of such a column. ... When run properly such a column can be of inestimable good, but it is obvious that such a column if not done properly, might succeed in spreading rather than curbing rumors. (“Have you?” 1942, 11)

By early November, BOI’s form letters on the subject had changed markedly to reflect Rosten’s decisions. Responding to a query from a citizen, Kane wrote that “direct denial is not necessarily the most effective method of scotching rumors. Their appeal is apt to be to the emotions rather than the intellect, and the factual refutation often falls short of the mark.” Instead, OWI’s stance was that “it is best to concentrate our energy, not on fighting rumors that have sprung up but rather

on building a strong body of enlightened public opinion which is the best defense against divisionist [*sic*] and defeatist misstatements" (Kane 1942e).

Rosten now focused on a major PR campaign on rumors. He persuaded Davis to give a national radio address on "War Information and Military Security" on November 19. Without naming names, Davis fiercely criticized members of Congress returning from visiting the Pacific who were spreading rumors about Navy defeats there and that OWI was covering it up with happy talk. He called rumors "phonies" (a term Rosten suggested) and emphasized that the government was releasing all news – good or bad – short of revealing military secrets. Not all rumors originated with malicious intent, he said:

I have cited some of the rumors that were current last month; I do not know who started them or why; but some rumors that have been traced down have started with the innocent misunderstanding of some small fact, and in no time that tiny kernel of fact has sprouted into a regular jungle growth of fiction. In those cases there was no evil intention – only a gullible willingness to believe the worst, whether it was so or not. I don't know what the government can do about that. We are trying not to fool the people, but we can't do much for citizens who insist on fooling themselves. (Davis 1942, 6)

The headline in the *Times* captured his message concisely: "Davis Denounces Rumor Mongering" (1942).

A few days later, OWI issued a three-page press release explaining its rumor policy. After analyzing more than 4,500 rumors and "in response to an increasing number of requests from newspapers, civic groups, and individual citizens for information on what they can do to guard against rumors and rumor-mongers" it described a typology of rumors: hate (the most prevalent), anxiety, escape, supernatural, and curiosity. It also discounted wild claims that most rumors had their origins in enemy propaganda. OWI encouraged individual citizens to follow five principles:

1. Never repeat a rumor.
2. Do not repeat a rumor verbally even to deny it.
3. If you know the facts which can spike a rumor, cite the facts promptly.
4. If you do not know the facts which can stop a rumor, ask the rumor-teller where he got his facts.
5. Don't give a rumor the benefit of any doubt.

Along with that, OWI endorsed how "the press and radio are fighting rumors – not by the endless process of denying each rumor, but by blanketing the rumors with authoritative information" (OWI 1942c).

OWI also used social science research to evolve a rumor policy for radio. A researcher at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research had conducted an empirical study of the impact of three radio programs intended to refute rumors. He concluded that radio was not an effective medium to counteract rumors (Wiebe 1942). Reflecting on his conclusions, in December 1942, OWI sent a report to all radio stations with recommendations on dealing with rumors. "An anti-rumor program – when conducted without a realization of the dangers involved – may well have undesirable

results” (OWI 1942d, 2, underlining in original). The results of the Columbia study were “the inescapable conclusion that a rumor which has been broadcast is a rumor that will be remembered” (4, underlining in original). Therefore, it recommended that radio stations regularly broadcast programs addressing the implicit subjects of rumors, with themes like “Did You Know?” and “Things You Should Know” (6). OWI’s across-the-board mantra was that “the best antidote for rumor is information” (8, underlining in original).

By the end of 1942, OWI’s rumor policy had settled into orthodoxy. It shifted focus from soliciting field reports to wide circulation of its guidelines internally and publicly. In early 1943, it released “Rumors in Wartime,” a confidential report with guidance for senior federal officials and the Allies (OWI 1943c). Its public-facing efforts also reflected its now-settled policy on rumors. The *Sunday Magazine* of the *New York Times* included an article about “The War on Lies.” The reporter wrote that OWI’s “rumor-scutching bureau” had now received and analyzed 5,000 rumors. This “rumor-spiking department...lives in constant dread” that local rumor clinics and newspaper columns (now numbering about 40) were “going to make a rumor worse by printing it and denying it in the wrong manner” (Shalett 1943). In May, as part of OWI’s widely distributed series of *Information Guides* aimed at the general citizenry, it concisely presented its policy. “Fighting rumors is a complicated, technical task that...presents many problems in public information, military security, and the broad field of social psychology.” Tepidly endorsing local rumor clinics, OWI emphasized that the focus should be on “information drives which do not repeat rumors.” In general, “it is not practical to combat rumors on a nation-wide scale. Most of them crop up locally and need treatment as local information gaps” (OWI 1943d). Rosten was OWI’s public spokesperson on information policy, speaking on two national radio programs and at Vassar College (Rosten 1942; 1943a; 1943b).

Congress largely defunded OWI’s Domestic Branch effective June 30, 1943 (Winkler 1978, 70-72). Its anti-rumor activities now evaporated, and Rosten and Horowitz departed OWI.<sup>1</sup>

### **Anti-Rumor Strategies by Individual Agencies: The Military and the Office of Price Administration**

While griping is part of military life, the services tried to suppress rumors as much as possible. The Navy warned new sailors, “*Don’t repeat scuttlebutt* about military subjects. Challenge all rumors and harmful stories about our allies, our inefficiencies or mistakes, the enemy’s strength, race dissension or breaches of discipline. Keep scuttlebutt to yourself and tell your shipmates to do the same” (US Navy 1944, 88, emphasis in original). The Marines issued a poster stating, “Blackout—The Rumors!! Silence Saves Lives” (Smithsonian, 2022). One of the most widely repeated rumors in the Pacific Theater was that anyone with VD would be quarantined on an island off California before discharge. “The story circulated so widely that Mrs. Roosevelt had to issue a denial” (Kennett 1997, 132).

There was probably no wartime federal agency more unpopular than the one dealing with prices and inflation. Consumers griped about shortages and rationing while producers complained loudly about unfair price regulation. Business lobbies and Congressional conservatives were glad to stoke the fire. Before Pearl Harbor, Leon Henderson headed the price stabilization effort, first in the

National Defense Advisory Commission. After Pearl Harbor, it became the Office of Price Administration (OPA).

As early as September 1940, Henderson was batting down rumors by explicitly denying them. This first occurred regarding excessive increases in lumber prices due to expectations about defense needs crowding out civilian needs. He said that any preemptive price increases were based on "unfounded rumors." He asserted that current production levels were adequate to serve civilian needs as well as acquisition of lumber for new army camps (National Defense Advisory Commission 1950, PR 95).

That was just the beginning. A postwar in-house history of OPA noted the unremitting rumors and criticisms. There was routine dynamic that played itself out repeatedly: "If a reporter heard a trade rumor, or shrewdly put bits of evidence together to make a guess in a 'dope story,' and asked for confirmation – or published it first and let readers inquire – what was OPA to say? The record suggests that [the office of public] Information was unskilled in dissembling" (Mansfield 1948, 304). This had the effect of further encouraging reporters to write about rumors and for critics to feed them more – even if wholly invented. Looking back on OPA's rumor strategy after the war, the historians concluded that the tidal waves of rumors attacking the agency were being generated by those who would never stop their "half-truths and innuendos." When dealing "with irreconcilable antagonists, individuals or organizations, none of the possible tactics open to OPA comported very well with the goal of winning confidence and consent through understanding. Candor and education presupposed an open-minded audience; when minds were closed the question became simply one of political victory or defeat" (318). Notwithstanding this fatalistic perspective, "it was OPA policy to react vigorously, however, to criticism believed to be unjustified, and to misstatements of fact; and the agency defended its right to keep the record straight" (317).

### **Anti-Rumor Strategies by Individual Agencies: Lend-Lease, 1941-1945**

President Roosevelt's pre-Pearl Harbor effort to help Great Britain fend off Nazi Germany led to the creation of Lend-Lease of the US providing it with military materiel and farm goods. To sell his idea to the public, he used an instantly understandable metaphor in a fireside chat on the radio. If my neighbor's house is on fire, wouldn't it be in my interest to lend him my water hose? Congressional approval was a major accomplishment in face of fierce opposition by isolationists and the peace movement, such as the America First Committee and its marquee spokesperson, Charles Lindbergh. After Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in mid-1941, FDR quickly expanded Lend-Lease to assist Stalin. Once the US joined the war, Lend-Lease was expanded to all the allies fighting Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Naturally, some military assistance, such as bullets, could not be returned. Instead, a program called reverse lend-lease calculated spending by the recipient nation to assist the US's military effort as the way lend-lease funds were paid back. Examples included building an airfield for use by the Army Air Force or providing food and clothing for US service members stationed in that country.

Even after Congress passed Lend-Lease, isolationists didn't give up. Their criticism of Lend-Lease continued at a high pitch. For example, at a press conference on August 26, 1941, FDR was asked by reporters about a newspaper story alleging misuse of Lend-Lease funds. He forcefully answered that such stories were "vicious rumors, or distortions of fact, or falsehoods." He then carefully added that his comment was "not a denial" (Roosevelt 1969, 1941:346). In other words, reporters could not file a story with the lead of "President denied the report that..." FDR understood that an on-the-record *denial* of a rumor had the effect of keeping it alive as well as giving it further credence because a denial was merely half of the conventional journalistic trope (later called) he-said-she-said.

Even after Pearl Harbor, Lend-Lease had only moderate support from public opinion. For example, the anti-FDR *Chicago Tribune*, while conceding it supported the war, continued to criticize Lend-Lease. An editorial in July 1943 titled "Lend-Lease as Fact and Fiction" focused on what it considered the misleading packaging of the program and the false expectations about anything being returned to the US after the war ("Lend-Lease as Fact," 1943). Many of the rumors OWI cataloged included negative ones about Lend-Lease. OWI also used survey research to poll public opinion about Lend-Lease. In spring 1943, it concluded that knowledge and support for Lend Lease were relatively high, but "as a means of guarding against ill-feeling arising out of post-war [financial] settlements, our information policy should continue to stress the two-way aspects of lease-lend" (OWI 1943a, 1). A follow-up survey focused on increasing awareness of reverse Lend-Lease (OWI 1943b), which tallied costs incurred by recipients of lend-lease to aid the US war effort and partially offset the amount of aid received and owed.

By early 1945, Lend-Lease administrators decided that the program needed an aggressive PR effort to face damaging rumors head-on. OWI's policy of not responding substantively to rumors nor counteracting them no longer seemed enough to stem the tide. As a result, Lend-Lease (then a unit within the Foreign Economic Administration [FEA]), released a report titled *Lend-Lease Fact and Fiction* on February 2, 1945. The agency justified the need for the report because "many of the rumors about lend-lease operations are without foundation in fact, while others are based on some fragment of truth but have become so distorted that they are entirely misleading" (FEA 1945, 1). It then listed 38 "fictions" about lend-lease, each followed by rebuttals.

For example, #9 regarding the rationing of butter in the US: "American tourists in Canada have been able to purchase all the butter they want, at low prices, and have allegedly found that the butter contains a lend-lease label." Answer: "Canada has not received any butter, nor any other commodity, under lend-lease. All of the butter that has been scheduled for export under lend-lease has been sent to the U.S.S.R. for use by the Russian army." Furthermore, butter "has been shipped in large tubs or fiber containers and not in pound prints, such as are sold at retail to customers" in the US.

FEA made a full-court PR push to circulate the document. It was covered extensively in the press, including national wire service stories from the Associated Press (Marlow 1945) and Hearst's International News Service (INS 1945). The *New York Times* published a long excerpt ("Lend-Lease 'Facts'," 1945). The *Los Angeles Times* (usually conservative and Republican) editorialized favorably because it was important "that Americans receive official facts which will refute baseless rumors" ("Lend-Lease Fact and Fancy," 1945). FEA also sought to amplify its message through

other federal publications, such as the Commerce Department's *Journal of International Economy* and the military's *Army Talks* ("Lend-Lease Fact and Fiction," 1945a; 1945b). A few months later, the information was included in one of President Truman's regular Lend-Lease reports to Congress. New graphics helped convey the information in visually memorable ways. For example, one chart showed that if a single cigarette represented Lend-Lease cigarettes, the military supplied 20 to US troops abroad and 60 were smoked domestically (US House 1945a, 44).

FEA released *Fact and Fiction* just in time for a House hearing in early 1945 on whether to extend the program. Conservative critics remained dubious and openly skeptical. They gave credence to rumors and were disinclined to believe official rebuttals. For example, Rep. Karl Mundt (R-SD) grilled Lend-Lease deputy administrator Oscar Cox about Britain charging the US military for the operations of an American air base in Prestwick, Scotland. Even after Cox answered his question by quoting from *Fact and Fiction* (#16), Mundt kept *insisting* that something was amiss based on the rumors he had heard, specifically that the British government charged a landing fee for every US plane landing there. He claimed that he believed this "because it was there that I heard the rumor" (US House 1945b, 30). The FEA document did not persuade him otherwise. Cox had to promise to double-check and submit a further elaboration for insertion into the hearing record. Cox's eventual response reconfirmed that the "United States Army and United States Navy planes do not pay a fee for landing on the Prestwick air base." In general, American "use of that field is made available to us as reverse lend-lease and without payment by us." In this case, it was a reference to the UK's spending for construction of air bases as a form of partial repayment of the value of lend-lease supplies it received. This brief exchange was a synecdoche for the fierce conservative political attacks on FDR's wartime leadership and the record of federal war agencies. Truth was secondary to the political benefits of circulating negative rumors about Roosevelt's botched war effort. Doing that might pay off at the next election. It was an early version of fake news.

After House passage, the bill went to the Senate. At its public hearing, Senator Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI) bored in on the report's claim that the rumor about the British charging the US for carrying freight on its railroads. The denial carefully stated the US "pays nothing" for that. Rather they were paid by reverse lend-lease. Vandenberg caught the slippery wording, "it is not true the United States pays nothing." While the US was not *paying* cash, freight charges included in reverse lend-lease were an *exchange* of services. Lend-Lease deputy administrator Oscar Cox had to confess that a more accurate wording should be "does not make cash expenditures." Vandenberg, triumphant, said, "That is a totally different thing. I think you have got a little fiction in your 'Fiction Department'." Cox had to concede that Vandenberg had "defictionalized" part of the document (US Senate 1945, 38). While no lasting damage had occurred (in terms of renewing the program), it was a lesson to bureaucrats about not parsing their statements so finely that something legalistically accurate deliberately gave a false impression.

*Fact and Fiction* helped carry the program through to Congressional renewal in the spring of 1945. But it was a close call. Lend-Lease now had tenuous political and public support, rapidly diminishing as the end of the war came in sight. This was one reason President Truman abruptly terminated it on August 21, 1945. He could have claimed that the extension statute gave him authority to maintain it a bit longer, possibly triggering a major battle with Congressional conservatives.

Political realities outweighed the managerial rationale for a phased shutdown. (He later relented slightly.)

### **Anti-Rumor Strategies by Individual Agencies: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1945**

As governor of New York, FDR was a supporter of public power, i.e., the generation of electricity from hydroelectric dams built by the government. Bringing that policy to the White House, he supported including in the New Deal an unprecedented regional federal agency called the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Its mission included power generation, flood control, and navigation. It was controversial from the start, in particular because it competed with for-profit utilities. Wendell Willkie, the 1940 Republican nominee for president, had established his national reputation as a lawyer battling the legality and constitutionality of the TVA. Senator Kenneth McKellar (D-TN) fought a years-long battle against it, in part because he sought to have patronage control over its employees. These political and conservative attacks on TVA continued unabated during WWII. Toward the end of the war, the fading of support for New Deal policies reflected in part in aggressive rising of pro-business narratives from the conservative coalition. TVA was facing an existential threat.

In early 1945, like Lend-Lease, TVA decided to issue a comprehensive rebuttal to these attacks. *TVA Facts versus Fiction* was a mimeographed report explaining that the agency was being “subjected to a degree of intensified and continuous scrutiny and observation by the public, the press, and investigating visitors which is probably unprecedented in the history of public enterprises” (TVA 1945a, 16). The report presented ten statements that, somewhat defensively, were replies to accusations and charges. For example, “TVA power operations are sound financially” (1), “TVA low rates are based on an accepted American business principle” (7), “TVA is responsible to Congress and to the President and is subject to adequate governmental checks and reviews” (14), and “TVA has cooperated with the states and strengthened, rather than weakened, their functions” (16).

After each statement was a detailed explanatory text. Some were technical rebuttals of charges from for-profit utilities, such as how TVA calculated net operating revenues and how it allocated the costs of dams between power generation, flood control, and navigation. The accusation that TVA was not subject to routine governmental oversight was explained with an elementary summary of federal budgeting, including annual appropriations from Congress, oversight by the Federal Power Commission, and auditing by GAO. TVA rebutted the political charge from conservatives that it was a threat to states’ rights (code for Jim Crow) with quotes from southern governors who were modestly complimentary or, at least, did not view it hostilely.

TVA’s PR offensive against rumors continued beyond V-J Day. In September, it reissued a slightly condensed 17-page report (TVA 1945b), and in April 1946, a slightly longer update (TVA 1946). Eventually, TVA changed tactics. Beginning in 1954, it started issuing annual pamphlets titled *Facts about TVA Operations* (TVA 1954). They largely covered the same subjects but presented them in a more positive light. TVA likely concluded the near-death existential danger had passed and that positive packaging was a more effective PR strategy.

## Conclusion: Anti-Rumor Strategies from Then to Now

Bureaucracies are rarely popular. Wartime suspends some of the usual criticisms as well as government benefiting from national solidarity. For agencies in WWII, the only precedent was WWI's CPI. It had used heavy-handed PR tactics to respond to any rumors critical of the administration. Rumors were countered with accusations of disloyalty and claims that all of them originated from German propaganda. However, the social and political context of WWII was different, including the unremitting conservative and business hostility of just about everything FDR did – war or no war – as well as his expansion of the scope of government before the war with the New Deal.

In WWII, federal agencies were a juicy target for rumors and criticisms. That the rumors often comprised negative comments about *how* agencies handled the wartime emergency made it that much harder to develop a comprehensive and effective PR counterstrategy. “No, we really are doing a good job!” was a non-starter. After extensive study, OFF and its successor, OWI, eventually concluded that counteracting individual rumors was futile and that point-by-point rebuttals were not effective. Instead, these PR agencies evolved a two-pronged approach: a general strategy of fighting rumors with positive information about the selfsame subject and broad condemnations of rumors per se. However, some individual wartime agencies disagreed with that approach. In particular, Lend-Lease, OPA, and TVA concluded they had to rebut aggressively major individual rumors. They concluded that OWI's approach was a losing strategy given their particular missions, the instability of their support on Capitol Hill, and the specificity of critical rumors regarding their operations.

These contradictory wartime strategies may hold important lessons for today's public administrators. Technologies have changed and the pace of communication has sped up, but the decision-making facing managers when dealing with rumors is roughly similar. Whether categorized as rumors or as fake news, they can spread quickly and virally. Social media can put agencies in a permanent defensive posture. However, there is no one-size-fits-all best practice that can be learned from history. Rather, the anti-rumor strategies of the federal government during WWII present today's government manager with a full menu of options that were developed during the war and are still, at heart, relevant to modern times. Instead, government managers are always at square one when facing deleterious rumors and fake news. In that sense, the changes in communications technologies have not superseded this basic dilemma. Therefore, each particular situation needs to be assessed and then, in reaction to the specifics of the situation, decided upon from the menu of options used during WWII. At heart, today's managers continue to have three basic alternatives: Ignore? Deny? Respond indirectly? (As discussed earlier, the option of neither confirming or denying something is limited to law enforcement and criminal justice.) In an era of fake news and omnipresent suspicions and accusations about government, public administration's PR predicament remains largely unchanged: To respond or not to respond, that is the question.

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## Appendix: Acronyms

BOI: Bureau of Information (within OFF and then OWI)  
CPI: Committee on Public Information  
OFF: Office of Facts and Figures  
OPA: Office of Price Administration  
OWI: Office of War Information  
TVA: Tennessee Valley Authority

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Rosten's subsequent career focused on popular writing rather than returning to his academic roots, including *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968). Horowitz returned to the academy, but changed his name to Hartley. At the time, this was common by Jews in the professions to reduce their obvious Jewishness and finesse invisible anti-Semitic employment barriers. For example, architect Frank Gehry was born Frank Goldberg. Similarly, just before graduating from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1939, my father changed his name from Jacob Levy to Jack Lee.

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