

The World War II Rumor Project: Helping Students Explore Historical Manuscripts to Reflect on Misinformation

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In December 1941, as the United States entered World War II, the country faced perils on multiple fronts. Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government sent soldiers and sailors to battle enemy troops in both Europe and the Pacific. Meanwhile, government leaders also grew concerned with a different type of threat at home: rumors and misinformation that potentially threatened to undermine national morale; for instance, rumors regarding national readiness, vulnerabilities, or damages sustained. In the face of these concerns, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9182 on June 13, 1942, creating the Office of War Information (OWI), which would oversee and disseminate all war-related information in the United States, to promote a public understanding of the war consistent with the government's objectives.

One OWI program in particular, the "World War II Rumor Project," sought to track and counter misinformation related to the war effort. Its goals were to learn more about the various ways misinformation spread through society, identify rumors that pointed to gaps in the public's understanding of the war, and engage in educational outreach via various media to improve this understanding.

Students can learn more about these efforts by examining

documents from the Library of Congress World War II Rumor Project collection (see sidebar on p. 45). By exploring these documents, students can gain unique perspectives into how the U.S. government grappled with the topic of misinformation at a critical time in U.S. history. The collection can also serve as a launching point to reflect on a range of issues still relevant today, including: how does misinformation emerge and what is an appropriate response?

The Pattern of Propaganda

One way to introduce students to the World War II Rumor Project is by showing them several pages from "Diagrams of Rumor and Rumor Control," available at: www.loc.gov/item/afc1945001_ms01006. Focus on pages 1 and 24, which appear to be two drafts of the same diagram, and invite students to study the documents:

What observations do they have? Does anything stand out?

Who do they think created these documents and for what purpose?

What questions do they have?

To encourage close observation and facilitate critical thinking, wait until after their initial responses to provide additional context or background

information on the source.

Encourage students to think deeply about what the documents have to say about the emergence and spread of misinformation. Sample responses may include:

- The heading on page 1, "The Pattern of Propaganda: Identification of General Sources of Rumor," implies a general purpose for the document. The comments at the bottom of page 24, "identify the source" and "verify every statement," similarly point to a purpose and audience. But students may have additional, related questions, such as "who *specifically* created the document, for whom, and for what *specific* purpose?"
- While the documents include the word "propaganda" in their headings, a close examination reveals that multiple types of information are referenced, including "lies," "propaganda of distortion issued by the enemy," and "unauthorized news, comments, editorials, opinions, and conflicting opinions." Some students might reflect that information sources such as "editorials" and "conflicting opinions" are not always the same as "lies" or "propaganda of distortion," perhaps illustrating how tricky it can be to control misinformation in a free society.



Poster, circa 1941–1945.

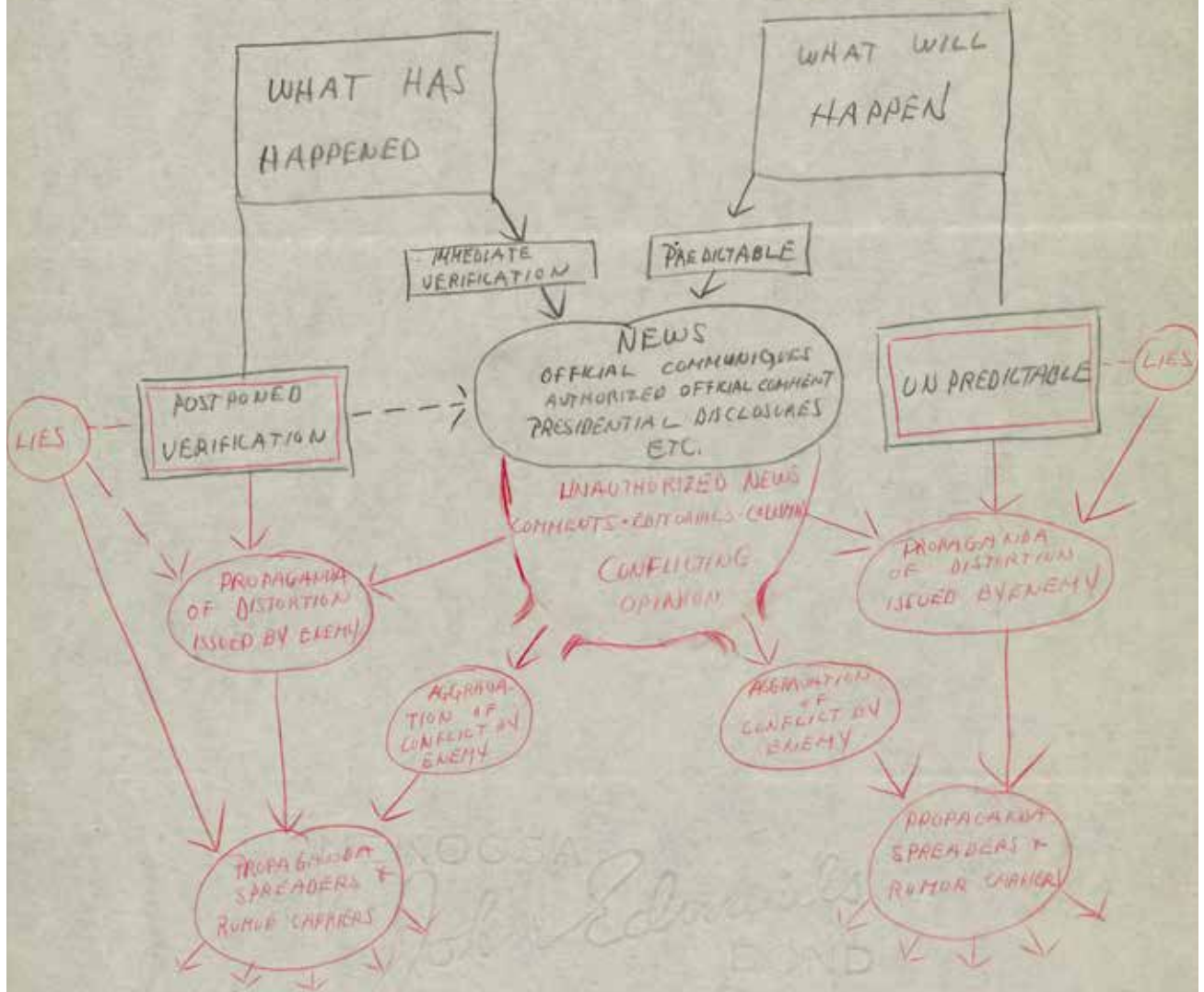
- The charts also show that the creator of the diagrams is concerned not only with lies and distortions of "things that have happened," but also wishes to control speculation regarding "things that haven't happened" yet.
- Finally, a number of different actors are identified as having contributed to the emergence and spread of misinformation. On the top portion of the diagram on page 1, "enemies" intentionally distort information and spread lies. On the bottom portion, "rumor spreaders" carry this misinformation forward. Students may wonder who these "rumor spreaders" are.

Might some of these be ordinary citizens, unaware that they are spreading misinformation? Students may also note that multiple arrows emerge from the rumor spreaders, perhaps implying the exponential spreading of misinformation once it hits the general public. Meanwhile, the large "news" section that appears both in black ("correct information") and red ("misinformation") implies that the media may be a vehicle for both types of information.

After students have made their initial observations, share additional context on the World War II Rumor Project from this article and sidebar. Explain to students

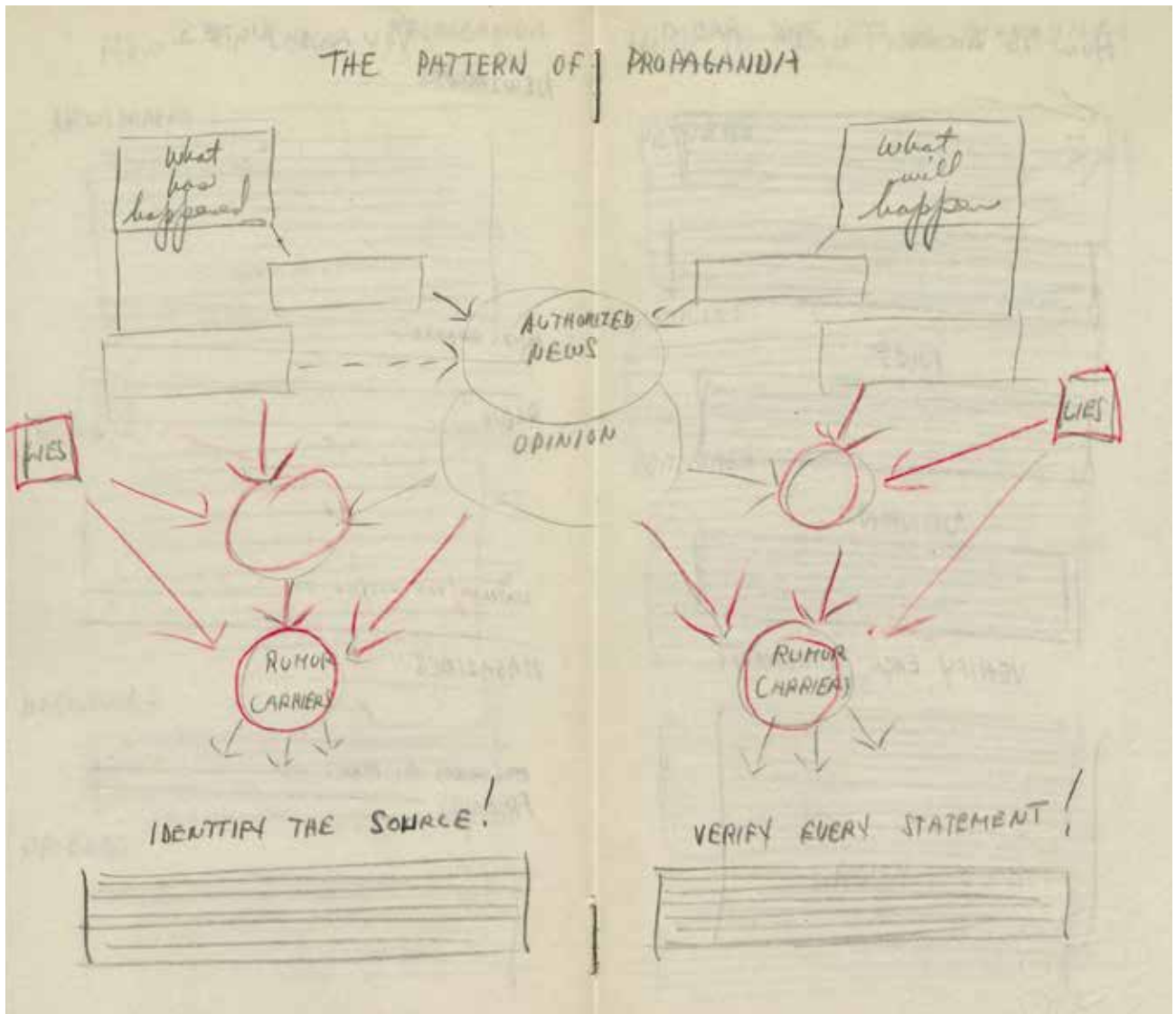
THE PATTERN OF PROPAGANDA

IDENTIFICATION OF GENERAL SOURCES OF RUMOR



RED AREAS ARE WHERE RUMOR BREEDS QUICKLY
 CHECK WHAT YOU HEAR AND READ
 AGAINST THIS CHART

Diagrams of Rumor and Rumor Control, Image 1 www.loc.gov/resource/afc1945001.afc1945001_ms01006/?sp=1



Diagrams of Rumor and Rumor Control, Image 24 www.loc.gov/resource/afc1945001.afc1945001_ms01006/?sp=24

that government officials were not simply interested in the abstract understanding of how rumors emerged and circulated through American society. The project also actively enlisted individuals across the United States to write down specific rumors and send them to field representatives. These individuals or “correspondents” included dentists, beauty shop operators, policemen, proprietors,

and librarians who had access to rumors in their communities. No names were collected in the process, but once rumors had been identified, government officials could use this information to inform its educational outreach efforts.

Combating Rumors

Other documents from the collection elaborate on how project officials proposed to both collect rumors and respond

to them. As a follow up to the diagram analysis above, show students “Rumor Control Project Documents - various editions,” located at: www.loc.gov/item/afc1945001_ms01001. While the full source is 42 pages in length, students can glean a great deal of information simply by reading the first page. Ask them to read this page closely, focusing specifically on any observations they have regarding how

continues on page 45

Butter combine our Confidential memo + the long 10 page release - then

RUMOR-CONTROL PROJECTS

The analysis of wartime rumors, and the creation of agencies intended to combat rumors, requires the most expert direction and execution. Unskilled efforts at "rumor-busting" can cause much harm by giving rumors publicity they might not otherwise obtain. Moreover, ineffective refutations can fix rumors more firmly and powerfully in the minds of those exposed to them. Injudicious treatment of rumors may increase public anxiety to the point where more of them spring up because of the anxiety created.

Specific suggests

See our first statement

The Office of War Information is prepared to co-operate with responsible community agencies engaged in rumor-control campaigns. The Office of War Information cannot undertake to answer specific rumors, except in rare instances, but it can provide informational materials designed to eliminate the more prevalent rumors by striking at their root-ignorance.

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Community Rumor-control projects have two main branches:

undertaken in a community similar to those done in neighborhood regions etc.

information

(1) rumor collection and analysis and (2) education. These must work closely together, for the educational program can be based on a careful analysis of the content and implications of current rumors.

Rumor-control projects will inevitably come into close relations with newspapers and magazines. Ordinarily such media will be glad to make space available to the project, sometimes for feature articles, sometimes for regular releases. In all such cases, the direction and responsibility for what goes into print must rest with the project directors and not with the

✓

WWII RUMOR PROJECT

from page 43

officials thought rumors should be countered.

Student insights, along with relevant quotes from page 1, might include:

- Public education and government transparency are key to combating misinformation: "Rumor-control projects have two main branches: (1) rumor collection and analysis

and (2) education. These must work closely together [underlined for emphasis in the document], for the educational program can be based on a careful analysis of the content and implications of current rumors."

- A lot can go wrong when combating rumors: "Unskilled [underlined for emphasis in document] efforts at 'rumor-busting' can cause much more

harm by giving rumors publicity they might not otherwise obtain. Moreover, ineffective refutations can fix rumors more firmly and powerfully in the minds of those exposed to them. Injudicious treatment of rumors may increase public anxiety to the point where more of them spring up because of the anxiety created."

World War II Rumor Project Collection

Disclaimer: This collection contains historical materials that are products of their particular times, including offensive language and negative stereotypes.

The World War II Rumor Project collection (www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-ii-rumor-project) at the Library of Congress contains manuscript materials compiled by the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI was established by Executive Order 9182 on June 13, 1942, to have a coordinated governmental war information program, which would promote an informed and intelligent understanding of the status of the war effort, war policies, activities, and aims of the U.S. government.

The World War II Rumor Project grew out of government concerns that rumors and misinformation circulating in U.S. society could impact national morale and undermine the war effort; for instance: rumors regarding national readiness, vulnerabilities, or damages sustained. One rumor collected as part of the project illustrates public anxiety over the government's transparency about casualties. "I don't think the government is giving us the correct information as to what is actually happening," the citizen wrote. "We know that things were much worse at Pearl Harbor than indicated. I think the American people can take it on the chin because we do not like to be fooled." (www.loc.gov/resource/afc1945001.afc1945001_ms02013/?sp=2) In this context, the goals of the World War II Rumor Project were to study how rumors spread in U.S. society, identify some of the main ones in circulation, and counter this misinformation with

educational outreach using a variety of media sources including newspapers, radio, and film.

The World War II rumor collection has two distinct components. The first involved recruiting individuals in communities who could report on rumors circulating in their area. These "correspondents" included people like dentists, beauty shop operators, policemen, proprietors, and librarians who had access to rumors in their communities. No names were collected in the process, but once rumors had been identified, government officials could use this information to inform its educational outreach efforts.

A second part of the project was an effort to survey high school and college students about rumors and opinions related to the war, as well as jokes, sayings, and poetry. This information was often collected by teachers. As one might imagine, much of this portion of the collection shines light on the unique concerns of young people at the time, such as the draft for military service. They also paint a vivid picture of many aspects of American society, such as race relations, and how the war brought those feelings out. For example, one female college senior from Tuskegee Institute wrote: "The white race has stopped saying *you* people in referring to the colored race. But *we* people must win this war." (www.loc.gov/resource/afc1945001.afc1945001_ms08115/?sp=20).

- News media can be a partner with government in combating rumors, but this partnership may not be entirely equal. “Rumor-control projects will inevitably come into close relations with newspapers and magazines ... in all such cases, the direction and responsibility for what goes into print must rest with the project directors [underlined for emphasis in document], and not with the magazine and newspaper editors.”

This document, and the diagrams referenced earlier, are full of ideas that students can reflect on, to consider how difficult it can be to address misinformation in a free society. Students may ask: What is the line between government officials wanting to know what people are saying so they can set the record straight vs. their encouraging citizens to report on what they hear from others, even if anonymously? When working with the media, how can government officials deliver useful information to the public while still respecting the free speech rights of media editors who may have additional questions or alternative perspectives? Can one always easily determine whether a piece of information is a deliberate fabrication designed to cause damage or whether it is simply an alternate viewpoint? And should one respond to such questions the same or differently in times of “national emergency” vs.

“normal times”? Obviously, there may be no easy answers to any of these questions. That said, close analysis of the World War II Rumor Collection does provide students with opportunities to reflect on the fact that society has wrestled with such tensions in the past as well as in the present.

Extension Activities and Additional Research

The analysis of documents from the World War II Rumor Project collection can also lead to extension activities and additional research opportunities. For example:

- The documents studied in this article point to both the real dangers of rumors within a free society but also the complications and perils of controlling them. Ask students to debate these issues from the perspective of life in the U.S. during World War II.
- Invite students to diagram the spread of rumors and misinformation today. Students could think about their own local “rumor mills” or the larger world they live in. What are the similarities and differences between how misinformation emerges and spreads today vs. what is represented in the documents featured here?
- Using the Side Bar in this article as a launching

point, assign students to research the part of the WWII Rumor Project not discussed in this article—the government’s effort to survey high school and college students to collect rumors and opinions related to the war, as well as jokes, sayings, and poetry. What insights emerge about 1940s American society from the statements found within the collection? ■



Michael Apfeldorf is an Educational Resources Specialist at the Library of Congress. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers/.



If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, **tell us about your experience!** During the last week of February, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers/ will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.