

Book Review: The Global Grapevine: Why Rumours of Terrorism, Immigration and Trade Matter

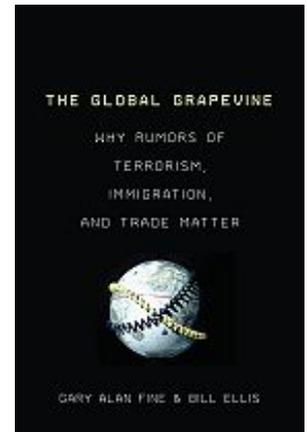
Charles Crawford encounters conspiracy theories, rumours and public anxieties in **The Global Grapevine**.

The Global Grapevine: Why Rumours of Terrorism, Immigration and Trade Matter. Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis. [Oxford University Press](http://www.oxfordup.com). 2010.

Professors Gary Alan Fine and Bill Ellis (Northwestern University and Penn State University respectively) are experts in the elusive: rumours, legends, conspiracy theories, mass paranoias. In this book they make a determined effort to offer a structured way of examining such phenomena in the age of globalisation, and to draw wider conclusions. Their analysis is subtle and often fascinating; their conclusions necessarily modest and not very convincing.

If you are interested in how public rumours emerge and spread, this well written book offers good analytical tools and insights. It looks in depth at a number of stories which are 'too good to be false' to show how they play into wider public anxiety.

One example drawn from the ocean of stories and analysis following 9/11 attacks is the 'good terrorist': an invariably untraceable person who gave a friend or (even better) a complete stranger a tip to avoid a place which later saw a terrorist outrage. The book picks apart different 9/11 conspiracy theories including Let It Happen on Purpose (LIHOP) and Made it Happen on Purpose (MIHOP), noting that both beliefs draw on the positive US tradition of showing scepticism towards people in power. (Note: conspiracy theorists of all descriptions exult every time democratic leaders make errors of fact and judgement: "*See, everyone said they could not be trusted on that – our explanation of this is therefore vindicated!*")



Other interesting chapters give examples going back into history of the fear that foreign immigrants introduce exotic diseases and/or vile practices. Foreignness as danger is demonstrated by scary stories of supposed misadventures for tourists overseas, or the different perils (poisonous spiders, man-eating rats) introduced into otherwise healthy societies by world trade. There is a lively chapter on murky stories surrounding trade in human body parts.

Foreignness need not involve foreigners; mere 'otherness' will do. The book describes how nineteenth century America produced vast lurid anti-Catholic literature describing how perverted nuns killed babies and ground the bodies into sausages. (Note: the human sausage motif appeared during the Bosnian conflict of the early 1990s).

The authors do a spirited job in making sense of this mass of (by definition) confusing and inconsistent material, arguing that successful rumours are both plausible and credible - 'too good to be false'. They draw terse insights: "rumours are often wrong, but they are rarely insane"; "an effort to halt the circulation of a rumour based on a conspiracy theory, paradoxically, demonstrates that it *is* true"; "rumour allows us to discuss hidden fears and desires without claiming these attitudes as our own".

So far so good. But the book is much less convincing where it moves on from describing/analysing rumours to trying to explain why they 'matter' and what if anything might be done about them.

Trite 'progressive' assertions pop up as if to pad out the argument (the globalisation of manufacture "has benefited American consumers, although not American workers"; "even (sic) in the Soviet Union, contact with the developing world ... is perceived to be dangerous"). Nor is there much analysis of the amazing way new technology allows rumours to spread round the planet almost instantaneously. Is this simply more of the same, or a qualitative difference? The authors do recognise that immigrant communities which cultivate their own isolation themselves need to break down walls.

The book peters out in a series of platitudes. "Rumours are not easily mastered"; we should "question claims which seem too good to be false", moving past "stereotypical thinking" to "recognize our strengths as a society" and "determine cautiously and carefully which forms of globalization strengthen us" (good luck with that one).

In summary, the book is interesting but tries too hard to be significant in showing why rumours 'matter'. Its core premise is that "rumours reveal important features of our society". Really? How to square that with the fact that as the book itself shows, many rumours bubble up round the world for decades in quite different societies? Sometimes rumours and fantasies fuel violent attacks on immigrants and other groups (see the latest horror in Norway). But is it not more significant that amidst the trillions of human interactions every day those attacks are so few and far between?

In any case, the book's claim that rumours matter is too USA-centric. For the best conspiracy theories the authors need to get on down to former Yugoslavia. In Sarajevo one school of thought has it that the European Union makes very clear that Muslims are unwelcome in Christian Europe. The evidence? The EU's yellow star-circle logo, obviously representing the halo above the Virgin Mary.

***Charles Crawford** is a former British diplomat, serving from 1996-98 as HM Ambassador in Sarajevo and was threatened with expulsion by President Izetbegovic's officials for briefing UK Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to raise corruption problems when Mr Cook visited Bosnia in 1997.*

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