Threats hidden in stories. Urban legends and security issues: analysis, challenges and perspectives

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Abstract— **This paper presents an introduction to the issue of urban legends in the context of security. For a long time, urban legends have been an integral part of urban culture, playing a role not only in terms of entertainment, but also in shaping perceptions of the world around us. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the potential impact of urban legends on community security. The submitted article proposes an analysis of this phenomenon, focusing on the complex links between urban legends and aspects of security. By focusing on selected examples, it will be possible to demonstrate the mechanisms by which urban legends emerge and function, as well as the consequences they can cause, including panic and disinformation in the community. The issue also poses challenges in terms of the threats posed by the proliferation of urban legends, and the need to develop strategies to deal with them.**

Keywords— urban legends, folklore, security, disinformation, fact-checking.

I. INTRODUCTION

The subject of urban legends has been a topic of interest for some time. A comparable concept, contemporary legends, is first evidenced in 1924 in the sixth chapter of The Great Gatsby, a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. American scholars broadened the scope of folkloristic inquiry by introducing a novel genre: the urban legend. Such narratives are also referred to as contemporary legend, modern legend, modern myth, rumor legend, rumor, gossip (Czubala, 2005) In this context, it is also important to refer to the concept of rumour. The study of rumour has a longer history than might be expected, having been initiated by psychologists Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman of Harvard University, who published the book Psychology of Rumour. They defined rumour as a "specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present" (Allport, Postman, 1947, p. ix). The informal and interpersonal nature of the transmission mechanism is a fundamental characteristic of rumours. Rumours are typically disseminated without any form of verification or scrutiny. The human inclination towards narrative and storytelling represents a significant contributing factor. People are inclined to share stories that are sensational.

In the context of urban legends, two items are typically highlighted as having contributed to the term becoming widely prevalent: "A contemporary legend. A Folklore Bibliography" (Bennett, Smith, 1993) which was created with the intention of compiling a bibliography of 1116 items, including articles and anthologies on contemporary legends and "The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings" by J.H. Brunvand (2003), that presents the issue of urban legends in a scholarly manner. The analysed term is defined as follows: "Urban legends […] are realistic stories concerning recent events (or alleged events) with an ironic or supernatural twist" (Brunvand J.H., 2003, xi). The characteristics of these stories will be subsequently delineated by the author: "In the world of modern urban legends there is usually no geographical or generational gap between teller and event. […] Urban legends are told both in the course of casual conversations and in such special situations as campfires, slumber parties, and college dormitory bull sessions" (Brunvand, 2003, p. 4). The defining feature of modern urban legends is their immediacy and relevance to the contemporary cultural and social context. The contemporary setting of urban legends renders them more compelling and credible to the audience. They are disseminated in a multitude of settings as a narrative, which allows them to be adapted to suit the specific context in question.

In Polish literature, the issue of tales is dealt with primarily by Dionizjusz Czubala (1985; 2005) and Dorota Simonides (1969). However, Polish folklorists recognised the genre of the

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tale of life (podanie) as early as the 1950s, and research in this area was begun by Józef Ligęza in his work "Ludowa literatura górnicza" (Ligęza, 1958).

Urban legends, also known as contemporary legends, contemporary myths, and rumours, are messages that are spontaneous, heated, and designed to trigger emotions and compel the recipient to react immediately. In essence, they can be defined as brief topical messages about extraordinary occurrences. This is how they can be distinguished from myths, which describe events that are distant in time. (Amrozy, 2017, s.118-121; Czubala, 2005). The characteristics of urban legends can be defined as follows: the duration of the narrative (the life cycle of the narrative), the geographical spread, the mode of transmission, the professional tone, and the functions they perform including warning of dangers (Czubala, 2005, pp. 29-31)

The narratives in question are distinguished by the fact that the majority of them feature a narrator who appeals to the credibility of a friend in order to substantiate the message. Additionally, these narratives are typically fictitious and function as folklore. Such works lack an author and are therefore anonymous. Another defining characteristic of these narratives is their oral transmission, which serves to disseminate them. It is evident that modern media and media mediums will favour the dissemination of such narratives, particularly when they are published on the radio, in the press or on the Internet. (Amrozy, 2017, pp. 118-119).

Przybyła-Dumin in her analysis of an urban legend and a belief story, states that folklore tales are typically created within small, familiar social units, addressing the needs of close-knit communities and their interactions with their environment. In contrast, urban or modern legends originate from large, often anonymous societies and reflect efforts to address significant social issues, which gives rise to their inherent exaggeration and sensationalism. This genre, which emerged in the 20th century, encompasses urban legends, contemporary myths, macroplots, and sensations, which serve the needs of larger communities. (Przybyła-Dumin, 2020, p. 126). The evolution of narrative forms can be observed in response to changing social dynamics. As societies expand and become more anonymous, the traditional functions of folklore tales are supplanted by urban legends. The capacity of narrative traditions to adapt to societal needs is evidenced by the way in which urban legends meet the requirements of contemporary society.

II. URBAN LEGENDS AND SECURITY ISSUES

A sense of security can be defined as a feeling of calm, while certainty can be created by the absence of dangerous events and the reduction of risk and uncertainty. A sense of security is thus influenced by a sense of being informed; a sense of certainty (stability); a sense of belonging to a community; and a sense of agency (Fałdowski, 2018; Klamut, 2012; Zięba 1997). These elements interact to create a subjective experience of safety and calm, which is essential for overall well-being. This holistic approach underscores that security extends beyond the mere

absence of danger, encompassing broader dimensions of psychological and social stability.

The circulation of urban legends can give rise to unwarranted fear within communities, which in turn can precipitate a state of excessive anxiety and a reduction in social activity. This can manifest in the form of the dissemination of information about murderers and child abductions. A further concern is the potential for panic and disinformation to exacerbate the situation. Furthermore, accounts of this nature can also encourage the commission of dangerous actions. The circulation of legends about haunted places can facilitate the propagation of behaviours that may result in the overlooking of genuine threats. An old building that is surrounded by negative associations (haunted) can be dangerous in itself, as it may be in danger of collapsing. The condition of a building's repair is not necessarily a deterrent to entry; on the contrary, it may be a source of fascination. Furthermore, urban legends can also serve to warn communities of dangers. It is important to note that the content of these stories can be about real dangers that may be present for members of the community. For instance, tales of mysterious disappearances can prompt residents to exercise caution.

In their article "Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends" Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia (2007) posit that "urban legends - synonymous with modern or contemporary legends - stem from the human need for meaning and arise in contexts where stories are told to yield meaning. Urban legends therefore function to convey mores and values, and they do so in an entertaining fashion. As a result, the contents of urban legends are funny, horrible and humorous events, woven into narratives that adapt to various locales and times" (DiFonzo, Bordia, 2007, p. 32). Urban legends, which originate from everyday life and address common fears and uncertainties, serve as a means for individuals and communities to find meaning in complex and often chaotic social realities. In modern societies, where rapid technological and social changes can create a sense of disorientation and anxiety, the need for meaning is particularly acute. The use of humour, horror, and surprise ensures that these stories capture the attention and imagination of their audiences. This makes them more compelling and facilitates their transmission. By addressing the human need for meaning, conveying societal values, and doing so in an entertaining manner, urban legends play a crucial role in the cultural landscape

Modern legends serve to communicate societal values and norms. They encapsulate collective fears and anxieties, transforming them into cautionary tales that warn against certain behaviours or underscore potential dangers. It is therefore beneficial to underline what Bennett (1985) has to tell us about this issue: "Modern legends seem to be like fables in their ability to focus fears, warnings, threats and promises, and to be like tall tales in the way the just-barely-possible occurrence is exaggerated to the point of wild improbability" (Bennett, 1985, p. 223). Tall tales, defined by their humorous and exaggerated nature, often present events that are plausible but exaggerated. This element of exaggeration in modern legends captures the audience's attention and imagination,

making the stories more memorable and engaging. The exaggeration serves to amplify underlying truths or concerns, making them more visible and resonant.

To illustrate the relationship between urban legends and security, we may cite an example that also formed the basis of deliberations and research by two sociologists, Best and Horiuchi (1985). This example illustrates the impact of the proliferation of legends, or stories, on feelings of safety and the contribution of contemporary mass media. In the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, the tradition of trick-or-treating was the subject of concern due to the circulation of rumours that orchardists were tampering with candy by inserting razor blades and traps. This prompted parents to subject their children's candy bags to inspection and screening at hospitals. In 1985, a survey conducted by ABC News revealed that 60% of parents expressed concern that their children might become victims. Nevertheless, a study by sociologists Joel Best and Gerald Horiuchi (1985) found no cases in which strangers threatened children's lives by manipulating candy. Nevertheless, several tragic incidents did occur, including the deaths of two children as a result of an overdose of heroin that had been hidden in candy by relatives, and cases of poisoning where a father knowingly added cyanide to his own child's candy. These events have prompted a significant shift in the behaviour of millions of parents over the 30-year span.

The tradition of telling tales of sadism at Halloween can be interpreted as an urban legend that originated in the early 1970s. This legend was created to express growing concerns about child safety, rising crime, and other sources of social tension. As Horiuchi and Best (1985) observe: "The case of Halloween sadism suggest (1), that urban legends may be viewed as a form of unconstructed social problem, (2) that collective hysteria, urban legends, and social problems construction offer alternative responses to social strain, and (3) that the emergence of a particular response to strain reflects social organization" (Best, Horiuchi, 1985, p. 495). Furthermore, they provide additional information: "This analysis suggests that collective hysteria, urban legends, and social problems construction are alternative responses to social strain, alternatives in which strain is translated into different forms of threat that are spread through different forms of social organization" (Best, Horiuchi, 1985, p. 496). The case of Halloween sadism provides an illustrative example of the broader sociological processes related to how societies deal with fear and uncertainty. This illustrates the dynamic interplay between informal narratives, collective psychological responses, and the formal mechanisms of social problem construction. The dissemination of collective hysteria frequently depends on informal networks and rapid communication channels, such as social media or word-of-mouth. Urban legends typically spread through cultural transmission, including folklore, literature, and media.

One of the most frequently recounted urban legends, which also includes a cautionary element, is the legend of the bloody hook, also known as The Hook. The narrative typically commences with the introduction of a couple in love who embark on a romantic excursion outside of their hometown. During their excursion, the couple overheard a radio announcement concerning the escape of a dangerous criminal with a distinctive trademark, namely a hook in place of a hand. The girl requested that her boyfriend return home, but he reassured her that there was no cause for concern. Subsequently, they heard disturbing sounds, which caused the girl to experience a state of distress. The driver, irritated, proceeded to depart from the area. Upon returning to the front of the house, the boy, although still visibly upset, demonstrated good manners by opening the door for the girl. Nevertheless, upon observing a bloody hook suspended from the handle, he lost consciousness. The girl's refusal to comply with the boy's demands ultimately spared their lives. In an interview, urban legends researcher Mark Barber elucidated the genesis of the story's enduring popularity. He posited that the narrative's appeal stemmed from parents' struggles with rebellious teenagers in the 1950s. In this context, stories like this were believed to instill in their children a sense of moral fortitude. (Degh, 1968a). This legend gained considerable popularity in the late 1950s and commenced its career in the context of college parties. It was primarily circulated among students residing in dormitories, fraternities, and other settings where young people gathered. By 1968, at least 44 variations of the legend had been recorded (Degh, 1968a).

Another example is the legend entitled 'Boyfriend's Death' (Degh, 1968b). The content of this legend can be summarised as follows: while travelling to a party, a young couple hears about the escape of a crazed murderer; at this point, their car suddenly breaks down. The concerned boyfriend elects to seek assistance independently (his girlfriend is attired for the party, in high heels and a dress). He requests that she cover herself with a blanket and remain in the vehicle until she hears three knocks on the window, which will indicate his return. Subsequently, the girl hears knocking, but the duration of the sound is longer than the three knocks. The sound is that of the boy's body hitting the car as he hangs on to the tree branch above them. Brunvand (2003) posits that this contemporary narrative not only conveys the moral lesson of avoiding dangerous situations, but also expresses the theme of helplessness and fear beyond the safety of home, particularly for young women.

III. CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

In considering the concept of social security as it relates to the integrity of culture and collective identity, it is important to recognize the role of folklore in shaping and nurturing the culture of the collective and belonging to it. Such a role was and continues to be fulfilled by those tales of life (legends). Stories created by the collective are often the result of misunderstood phenomena and dangers that descend on the community. These stories aim to make sense of events, to restore a sense of security. They have an informative, integrative function and shape a sense of identity (Przybyła-Dumin, 2013). Folklore is a component of folk culture, which, at the micro level, is encountered most often by the individual. However, as previously stated, folklore is a response to the fundamental

needs of the human condition. It can therefore be considered to be part of social security.

When we transfer our analysis to the issue of urban legends, we can see that they foster a sense of security, which we would identify as the security of the individual. This is one of the functions that they serve. The dissemination of the legend of the black wolga is intended to draw attention to safety issues through the following message: it is advisable not to get into a car that one does not know. It is also important to note that urban legends can pose a challenge to public safety, particularly in the context of the potential for panic and the spread of misinformation. This analysis of urban legends reveals that they can pose a threat to public safety.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, further issues pertaining to contemporary legends include those instances where crime is motivated by these stories. It is possible that crime may be motivated by urban legends, with examples including theft and vandalism in locations believed to be haunted. Furthermore, there have been instances of imitation. It is also important to consider the potential material losses that can result from the spread of urban legends. These can affect businesses and organisations, leading to financial losses. This phenomenon occurs when popular tourist destinations experience a decline in visitor numbers due to the circulation of negative narratives containing rumours of danger.

How can we protect ourselves from the potential dangers posed by narratives disseminated within communities? One potential avenue for addressing this issue is to gain an understanding of the various models of information dissemination and rumour spreading. The analysis of information spreading include different approaches. In their 1964 article, "Epidemics and Rumours," authors D.J. Daley and D.G. Kendall (1964) compare the spread of epidemics with the spread of information. The authors analyse the similarities between these processes and draw an analogy between infectious diseases and rumours. In a separate study on the propagation of rumours, the authors (Moreno et al., 2004) indicate that the efficiency and reliability of the rumour process are contingent upon the rules of interaction between the nodes in the network. One of the findings of their study suggests that it is preferable to initiate rumours from the most connected nodes (Moreno et al., 2004). Spreading of information is also the main problem of the study concerning word-of-mouth process. The study examines the influence of strong and weak ties between individuals on the transmission process (Goldenberg et. al., 2001).

In their article "Threshold Models of Diffusion and Collective Behavior," Mark Granovetter and Richard Soong (1983) introduce threshold models that explain collective behavior. These models aim to create diffusion or epidemic frameworks that explicitly consider population diversity, instead of assuming uniformity. By doing so, they avoid relying on stochastic models. The authors posit that these threshold models, which reflect the evident differences in individuals' likelihood to adopt or succumb, align more closely with observed behaviours than stochastic models, which fail to explain why different individuals make different decisions

(Granovetter & Soong, 1983).

A social analysis of the problem of gossip within social networks was conducted by researchers from the University of Zaragoza, who described two models of rumour diffusion. In one, they account for heterogeneity in the probability of activation by assuming that more active users play a larger role, but that some spreaders remain inactive. In the second model, they take into account the situation in which a person (whom they call ignorant) may become aware of a rumour but not spread it. Researchers extracting data from an online micro-blogging platform have proposed modifications to models of rumour spreading, where differences in reaching different numbers of people can be observed depending on the location of the source in the most connected parts of the network or at the fringes (Borge-Holthoefer, et al., 2013).

Marcella Tambuscio i Giancarlo Ruffo (2019) in their analysis of the problem of fact-checking, state: "To draw a conclusion from our experimental settings, our what-if analysis show evi dences that, even in a very pessimistic scenario where no one verify the news, some debunking strategies can be applied and have a partial success in limiting the misinfor mation spread, specially exploiting the presence of more skeptic agents in the network. Conversely, a censorship action on the nodes that broadcast hoaxes could not be help ful since new nodes can easily replace the silenced ones. Therefore, our results can surely be helpful in developing new policies to build fact-checking platforms and to foster their usage" (Tambuscio, Ruffo, 2019, p. 16), and further explain that in "the worst case scenario: the agents can not verify the news, and the debunking can only be spread at a neighbor hood level influencing agents that have not taken a position against or in favor a given fake news yet. We proved that, in different network topologies, the strategy of fixing the belief of a portion of the Fact-Checkers can indeed limit the misinformation spreading, even if the location of these agents has a big influence on the success of these strate gies. This could mean that, even if the debunking services provided by the main stream mediaoronline platforms are not muchvisited, they are still useful to restrain a fake news diffusion, specially if their usage is strategically coordinated by a skeptic community". (Tambuscio, Ruffo, 2019, p. 16-17)

In the context of the potential dangers posed by urban legends, and in particular their diffusion, it is of the utmost importance for communities to be aware of their existence. It is also important to emphasise the necessity of critical thinking, and in this context, the role of education cannot be overestimated. This will facilitate the dissemination of reliable information. Furthermore, fostering an environment that encourages scepticism and verification of facts can significantly mitigate the impact of misinformation. Consequently, the integration of media literacy into educational curricula becomes a crucial aspect in the construction of resilient and well-informed communities.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The issue of urban legends in relation to security requires us

to consider a number of complex components, including the very characteristics of urban legends, their functions and the models of their spread in communities. It is of paramount importance to analyse these models and to ascertain that we are dealing with an urban legend rather than reliable information, particularly in the context of threats to the collective. It is evident that urban legends serve to promote safety through their warning function. However, it is equally clear that they can foster the spread of panic and misinformation.

In one of her articles Linda Degh (Degh, 1991), a researcher from Indiana University, draws attention to the essence and role of legend writing: "What does the legend mean for its bearers? I believe this is the heart of the matter. The legend, observed in the field […] usually entertains an extranormal topic that is unusual and surprising, shocking and frightening while remaining on the plane of the real world" (Degh, 1991, p. 30). It is crucial to recognise that legends are not merely narratives; they are also cultural artefacts filled with meaning for those who perpetuate and believe in them. Legends often serve as a mirror reflecting the values, fears, and concerns of a society. Legends frequently utilise elements that lie at the periphery of everyday reality, such as supernatural occurrences, inexplicable phenomena, or sinister threats. It is these extranormal aspects that render legends so compelling and memorable, engaging the imaginations of their audiences and providing a form of escapism while also addressing real-world concerns. The popularity of urban legends can be attributed to their intrinsic nature, which includes elements of fear, surprise, and shock. These elements provide fertile ground for the spread of such legends. Furthermore, urban communities and the social groups that function within them, through the use of mass media, facilitate the dissemination of legends and stories at a faster rate. (Degh, 1991, p. 13).

In summary, the complex relationship between urban legends and community safety issues has to do with the complex nature of collective behaviour, including human safety concerns. Urban legends influence public perceptions and behaviour, sometimes exacerbating security concerns by spreading misinformation and fuelling unfounded fears. The phenomenon analysed highlights the need to analyse patterns of information dissemination and the need for effective communication strategies and public education to reduce the impact of disinformation. In addition, understanding the sources of urban legends and how they spread can provide valuable information for policy makers and law enforcement agencies to address underlying public concerns and build community resilience. Encouraging critical thinking is essential to help communities better cope with such challenges.

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