

## **Study: Belief in rumors about proposed NYC mosque linked to opposition to all mosques**

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People who believe false rumors about the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque near Ground Zero in New York City not only are more likely to oppose that project – they are more likely to oppose building of a mosque in their own neighborhood.

Researchers surveyed 750 Americans and asked them if they believed any of four rumors associated with the [New York City](#) mosque, all of which have been refuted. One of the rumors, for example, falsely says that that the proposed center is scheduled to open on September 11, 2011 in celebration of the 10-year anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks.

The findings suggest that among those who believed none of the four rumors, two-thirds are opposed to the proposed project. But that increases to 82 percent among those who believed three or more rumors.

Even more dramatic is the effect that belief in these rumors has on support for mosques outside of New York, said Erik Nisbet, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

Results suggest that predicted opposition to building of a mosque in the respondent's own neighborhood increased from 39 percent among people who believed none of the rumors to 63 percent among those who believed three or more of the rumors.

"These rumors have a negative effect well beyond the specific controversy in New York City," Nisbet said.

"They seem to shape attitudes about Muslims and their role in our society, no matter where we live. That's a big concern."

Nisbet conducted the study with R. Kelly Garrett, assistant professor of communication at Ohio State.

Another important finding of the study was that people who relied heavily on Fox News for their information were more likely than casual users to both know about the rumors – and to believe them.

The two researchers decided to survey Americans about the mosque controversy because it fit with both of their research agendas: Nisbet is interested in public opinion and American-Islamic relations, and Garrett is interested in the role of rumors in political communication.

They used the firm Survey Sampling International to recruit participants from a national online panel. Volunteer participants were surveyed between September 14 and 19, 2010.

While the 750 people surveyed represented a broad range of adults, it is not a representative sample of all Americans, and so the proportion of people in this study who have heard or believe rumors should not be taken as national averages, according to the researchers.

Instead, the study was designed to focus on how differences in exposure and belief in rumors and support for the proposed New York mosque were associated with media use.

In addition to the rumor concerning the opening date of the proposed center, participants were asked about three other false rumors. One was

that Feisal Abdul Rauf, the Imam backing the proposed Islamic cultural center and mosque, is a terrorist sympathizer who refuses to condemn Islamic attack on civilians. Another is that the Muslim groups building the center have deep ties to radical anti-American and anti-Semitic organizations. The final rumor is that the money for the center is coming primarily from foreign financial backers associated with terrorist organizations.

These rumors were chosen because they were all listed as false by FactCheck.org, run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, or PolitiFact, the Pulitzer-prize winning service of the St. Petersburg Times.

Survey participants were all asked to rate how much they relied on various media outlets for their news. They were also asked whether they heard any of the rumors and if they believed in them.

The results showed how reliance on specific media sources played a strong role in whether people were exposed to the rumors and if they believed them, Nisbet said.

People who said they relied heavily on Fox News, either online or on television, were more aware of the false rumors about the mosque and were more likely to believe these rumors compared to those with low reliance on Fox.

Findings suggest that a typical respondent who reported a low reliance on Fox News believed 0.9 rumors on average, while a similar respondent with a high reliance on Fox believed 1.5 rumors – an increase of 66 percent.

Garrett emphasized that all these comparisons in the study were made while holding constant other variables, including education, party

affiliation, ideology, and other media use.

"Our analyses demonstrate that the relationships we found aren't just a side effect of some other characteristic, such as political ideology or party affiliation," Garrett said.

"These results suggest that even a well-educated, liberal Democrat would be more likely to believe the rumors, if he relied heavily on Fox for his news."

Reliance on conservative talk radio had a similar effect on users as did Fox News. Those with a heavy reliance on conservative talk radio heard on average two rumors, compared to 1.5 rumors for those with a low reliance – an increase of 33 percent.

Respondents who relied heavily on CNN or NPR believed fewer false rumors, the study found. High reliance on CNN reduced the number of rumors believed by 23 percent, while heavy use of NPR reduced belief by 25 percent.

People who relied heavily on broadcast television news – ABC, CBS or NBC – were less likely to have been exposed to the rumors. Heavy reliance on those sources was linked to a 22 percent decrease in rumor exposure compared to those with low reliance on those outlets. That may be because broadcast news had fewer reports on the mosque controversy than did the cable news outlets.

The best way to get accurate information about the proposed Islamic cultural center seemed to be newspapers, according to the study.

People who said they relied heavily on newspapers for their news (either print or online) increased their exposure to rebuttals by 67 percent when compared to people who relied little on papers. These rebuttals were

shown to strongly promote accurate knowledge about the rumors.

Nisbet noted that this wasn't just because newspaper readers are more attuned to politics. Comparing people who paid similar attention to the mosque controversy, those who read newspapers still had greater exposure to the rebuttals.

"This is one of the unique contributions of newspapers in the media landscape," Nisbet said.

"When you consider that newspaper readers are more likely to be exposed to rebuttals of false information compared to other media outlets, it is worrying that newspapers in general have been struggling. It is something we should be concerned about."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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