



On Rumours: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done, by Cass R Sunstein (Penguin, £9.99)

Rumours are as old as history, but in the age of the internet and social networking, when people increasingly inhabit “echo chambers of their own design”, they spread like wildfire and they have a nasty habit of sticking to the wall, even after being refuted. In what is more of an extended essay than a book (it’s barely 90pp long), American law professor Cass Sunstein explores why we believe rumours and what we can do to protect ourselves against them. His style is rather dry, but the subject is both timely and important, showing that the crowd - so often the shibboleth of internet gurus - can lead us astray. We are unwittingly influenced by like-minded people to believe things our senses tell us simply aren’t true (the cascade effect) and when we get together in groups our views become more extreme (group polarisation). Indeed, people in groups, either online or in the real world, often behave in ways that encourage the spread of groundless rumours. He argues that these mechanisms need to be more widely understood. The crowd needs to become more sceptical. **PDS**