

# Gossip: harmless fun or malevolent presence?

Julie T Davis considers the role of gossip in society.

*There is a saying that goes something like: 'the one thing worse than being gossiped about is not being gossiped about at all' and the wealth of gossip magazines, television shows and celebrity 'blogs' would certainly demonstrate that gossip is a multi-billion dollar industry, certainly within the world of 'celebrity' and entertainment. Indeed one man, Perez Hilton, has risen from obscurity and gained celebrity status and a net worth in excess of \$30 million for creating a 'celebrity blog'. This article considers the forms gossip may take and the role it has and does play in society.*

Gossip is not a postmodern 'invention' promulgated by attention-seeking 'wannabees' desperate for celebrity status or indeed notoriety. It is centuries old and was (and often still is) a form of communication avowed in and between ancient civilisations (Hunter, 1990; Paine, 1967). Gossip arguably depicted and was representative of the mores of society of any given time. The common denominator, both then and now, is the role gossip plays in the creation, maintenance and destruction of reputation, at the same time acting as a barometer of and for social control (ibid.). So what is gossip and why do we all (whether we deny it or not) engage in such a 'questionable' social more?

## Communication

To all intents and purposes, gossip can be viewed as a form of social intercourse that, in terms of communication, separates 'us', homo-sapiens, from the rest of the animal kingdom (Dunbar, 1996). Language is in itself a 'gift' we acquire and develop from birth; so

by the age of 18 we should possess a verbal lexicon of approximately 60,000 words (ibid.). Arguably the way this lexicon is broadened, developed and hence utilised depends on a number of factors: upbringing, education and, to a greater or lesser extent, dialectical choice.

So, as previously stated, language is a form of communication that enables us to confer our thoughts, wishes, desires and instructions to others, from the most informal through to that utilised among the ivory towers of academia and highest courts and echelons of any given society. Yet, as noted by Dunbar, whether we are conversing in the boardroom or on the boardwalk, our levels of conversation will almost certainly depart from the intellectual, scientific or technical, as this is predominantly reserved to impress or entertain significant others. Eventually, we all fall 'back to the rhythms of social life' and turn to what is commonly known as gossip.

Just like our more formal conversations, gossip comes in many forms and has a variety of 'intentions'. It can be simple, idle chit-chat between family, friends and colleagues, catching up on who has done or is doing what, reminiscing about 'old times'. It is, as suggested by Hunter (1990), 'mere talk without malice' where people swap details on the minutiae of life and where we, to a greater or lesser extent, are in control of this process. Alternatively, gossip can be about sharing the private with those we trust, our personal thoughts, wishes, desires and worries that we often bear on our own. In this respect, gossip can have a somewhat cathartic effect.



## Reaffirmation

According to Loudon (quoted in Paine, 1967) 'gossip is undoubtedly the most important channel for constant reaffirmation of shared values about behaviour'. As a result, gossip can evoke a sense of belonging, that we are somehow part of the 'in crowd'; from a Durkheimian perspective, it is sharing a set of values, thoughts and interests that create a collective identity, whether that be at a social or professional level. Gossip in this sense could be seen as having a positive role to play. That is, of course, if all things are equal, and there will always be a variety of dynamics within any particular group setting based on determining contexts (for example, class, age, race, gender, sexuality, knowledge) and hierarchies, perceived or otherwise.

Despite popular myths, men like to become involved in and indeed promulgate gossip just as much as women. Research undertaken by Dunbar (1996) discovered that, while the topic of gossip pretty much revolves around similar issues, i.e. 'discussing personal relationships and experiences' as well as those of others, it would probably come as no surprise to social anthropologists, psychologists and very likely many women from all walks of life (with or without those academic credentials), that the focus of men's gossip changes when in 'mixed sex groups'.

This is where the very 'purpose' or indeed 'use' of gossip changes.

Dunbar (1996) noted that, once in the company of women, men's topic of conversation becomes more aligned with a process of self-promotion that is all part of a mating ritual not dissimilar to that of the peacock. Unlike women, who while in the company of men will spend approximately 'two thirds of their social topic time' discussing the lives of others as part of a networking process, men in the same situation will spend 'two thirds talking about themselves', their achievements, financial status, knowledge and intellectual ability.

### Aggrandisement

Arguably this form of aggrandisement is not solely the reserve of men, nor is it primarily utilised as part of some kind of elaborate mating ritual. Gossip in this sense can be used to affirm or create a higher, greater sense of credibility or elitism (Paine, 1967). The role of language is all important here, as within any given field there is a particular level, a framework of vocabulary that may/ may not be achieved through varying levels of academic attainment. What can be discerned is that the choice of vocabulary can be and is utilised to deliberately exclude those who the 'in group' do not wish to include, or indeed wish to chastise, criticize or arguably maintain control over. In this respect, gossip can be used to make moral judgments about 'others' who are seen to be 'outside' of a given social milieu; not only can it exclude, it can also make or break reputations.

As highlighted by Hunter (1990), 'gossip requires a public setting to be effective'. Historically, this took place in the forums and market places. With ever-growing forms of media and advancements in technology, gossip now has a far broader audience and has automatically lost all notions of 'private' (Solove, 2007). Arguably, prior to the development of the mass media, and more latterly, the World Wide Web, gossip was fairly localised and, to some extent,

forgettable, dependent upon memory retention and the storage of data. Today, however, and particularly with the introduction of social networking sites and mobile technology, which has seen millions willing to divulge their personal details on-line, information can find itself spread across the globe in seconds. It becomes 'permanent and searchable', retained until it is accessed again when needed for whatever purpose (ibid.).

There is no doubt that these varying forms of communication have their benefits and indeed have helped launch the career of many, with or without any discernable talent, apart from a penchant for self-promotion or craving for attention. However, it is the somewhat sinister nature and questionable methods utilised by those who choose to exploit 'information' that is a cause for concern.

### 'Chinese whispers'

Spacks (cited in Hunter, 1990) outlines the deliberate and often malicious presentation of gossip in the form of 'half-truths and falsehoods' in order to cast a shadow or malign the reputation of individuals. We could argue that this has gone on for centuries in the form of smear campaigns that have led to the resignation or downfall of many an MP or premier. Solove (2007) notes how gossip, malicious or otherwise, does have a tendency to spiral out of control once it is promulgated via the internet. So while what is reported may be a rather minor transgression, once picked up by the masses, it can be formulated into something else entirely – a form of cyber 'Chinese whispers'. The target of that gossip then becomes the 'prey', hunted down, maligned, chastised, named and shamed by the cyber-mob. Nowhere has this been more prevalent than in that rather dubious and questionable world of the 'celebrity'.

Historically, celebrity status was gained through possessing a specific talent or gaining awards in the field

of entertainment, sport and occasionally politics, and any form of scandal, notoriety or indiscretion 'might have ended a career' (Cashmore, 2006). Today however, in the highly commodified world of 'celebrity', the opposite appears to be the case – celebrities 'caught' being indiscreet or engaging in questionable behaviours, have 'turned a potentially embarrassing and maybe ruinous incident into an opportunity' (ibid.). Others, via the emergent world of Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, have undoubtedly courted and promoted their own gossip. Arguably this is a win-win situation, as if they do not like what appears, they can ultimately 'gag' and then sue the medium that promoted it.

Love it or loathe it, gossip is certainly part and parcel of everyday life and, as has been noted, what we choose to do with it very much depends on what we hope to achieve by spreading it. Whilst 'definitions of what is newsworthy in the first place' (Herman and Chomsky, 1994) may not have changed, the power to define and set norms and ultimately 'punish' the transgressors has (Solove, 2007). The media, in its many forms may light the touch paper, but the public fuel the fire. ■

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