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Catherine Bush

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Article abstract

It can be useful to return to some fundamentals when thinking about what gives gossip its power, whether words spoken aloud or words that spread and leave their indelible traces throughout the digital realm. As a novelist and storyteller, I'd like to employ some lines of thought about what we do when we read fiction in order to consider gossip as an act of creative reading. Gossip, like a gift, depends on being received by someone, is defined by the intention to be received. Current fMRI studies have shown the empathetic capacities generated in individuals after reading works of fiction. I want to consider what happens when we imagine something about someone else, and how the engaged creativity of the recipient is essential to the act of gossiping.

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Imagined Bodies: Reading Gossip as Fiction

Catherine Bush
University of Guelph
Canada

What follows, rather than a scholarly paper, is an essay and meditation on gossip that is informed by my practice as a novelist and my thoughts on how we read fiction. The essay divides loosely into two parts. The first part examines the characteristics of gossip. I believe it is useful to return to fundamentals and define one's terms. Gossip is a much-used word but what exactly do we mean by it? Others may take issue with my definition but I wish to be clear about my own use of the term. In particular I highlight the role of the listener or recipient in the dissemination of gossip. The second part of the essay draws on a parallel between the transmission of gossip and the reading of fiction and the similarly collaborative role played by the recipient of gossip and the reader of fiction. Current fMRI studies have shown the empathetic capacities generated in individuals after reading works of fiction. I consider what happens when we imagine something about someone else and argue that the engaged creativity of the recipient is essential to the act of gossiping as to the reading of fiction.

*

What is gossip? It can be written but it originates in speech. It requires three constituent parts: someone who speaks, someone who is spoken about, and someone to listen and receive the gossip.

You can't gossip about yourself, no matter how salacious the story you tell: to qualify as gossip you must be speaking about someone else, often but not necessarily known to you. And gossip must be spoken about a person. Rumour can be about information or event. Can one gossip about a non-human being, about a dog? Possibly. Can you gossip about the dead? Yes, but not really. I'd argue that gossiping about the dead is really something else. Gossip requires tension in all three lines of triangulation of the gossip relationship. You're talking about or listening to a mini-narrative that the person spoken of doesn't know you know or wouldn't want you to know, a tension that is defused if they're a corpse and incapable of caring about what you know.

Gossip requires a listener. No matter what lurid details of another's life I'm giving voice to, it is not gossip if I pass this on to a dog, or whisper these details into a hole in a tree.

Gossip begins in intimacy. Even if word ends up broadcast to millions, the originating form of gossip is as an intimate act: one person telling another something about someone else that isn't widely known or this person wouldn't want widely known. It contains the aura of the secret, what shouldn't be openly said and may not even be true. Its reception retains this aura of intimacy and the private even once the transmission of the gossip becomes public and reaches multiple or even multitudes of recipients. Gossip can be read: more than that, it is constituted in the same way that we read books, stories, fiction, in so far as it originates in a private encounter, and asks us to imagine something about another.

That is to say, gossip is not by its nature performative: to announce a salacious or transgressive story about another to a crowd is not to gossip. In this way, I'd argue, gossiping is not like what happens on social media, because there's an inherently performative nature to the way stories get passed on there; we know they're being projected to a group; to post something on Facebook, to respond to another's status update, to tweet, is entered into as a public act and conversation. Others may disagree, but I want to make the point that these acts are inherently communal, not private. Gossip requires a semblance of privacy. When it comes to widely

disseminated gossip magazines, there remains an illusion of privacy. The dissemination occurs, theoretically speaking, behind the back of the one gossiped about, and magazines are bought and read individually. Like a book, gossip may reach many but through a series of conceptually private encounters rather than public-square broadcasting.

Also, and crucially, the gossiper may want many people to know the story she tells, but if everyone knew it, it wouldn't be gossip — or, let's say, it wouldn't be gossip if everyone knew it and acknowledged knowing it. Gossip requires some instability. If everyone were to know it, its instability would have to come from its epistemological uncertainty, its inability to be verified. We can pay for gossip, in the form, say, of gossip magazines in the same way, say, that we pay for a novel, but gossip's value is not determined by its price any more than a novel's is. Gossip's currency is the potency of its story, a potency derived from its desirability as story, its aura of privacy, even secrecy, its uncertain status, and the intimacy and power that its possession conveys.

I'd like to focus here on the act of receiving gossip, on the role of the listener, or reader, of gossip. And I would in particular like to consider the parallels between what we do when we receive gossip and what we do when we read a work of fiction.

Part of gossip's power lies in the desire to pass it on and the energetic field that this desire creates. Communicating gossip doesn't diminish its power as long as it retains some of the aura of the intimate, the transgressive, the unstable, and its allure as a good story. Whether or not gossip is true, and even if its teller doesn't believe it to be true, there is a desire to believe it, and a commitment to telling it. This urgency is part of the transfer between teller and recipient, the teller's urgency met by an eagerness in the recipient, even if that eagerness may be twinned with a frisson of discomfort. A relationship is created: the transfer isn't just informational but emotional and energetic. In this context, it is worth noting the different ways in which we believe. There are things that we believe factually, stories that we believe because they make sense to us, and stories that we believe because we want to believe them.

The recipient of the gossip must be in an open state of curiosity, and receptivity, willing to receive the gossip and aware of the privilege or status derived from receiving something that others do not possess. In some senses, the receiving of gossip functions like the receiving of a gift as theorized by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift* (1983). Hyde describes how in what he calls the gift economy value accrues through the transfer of gifts between people, the gift's power deriving from its transfer rather than its hording or accumulation. He then compares this phenomenon to the way we give value to works of literature outside of the market economy. Their non-monetary worth comes from the exchange between the work of art and art's recipient, and from the art being kept in motion through repetitions of its transmission. The exchange itself offers value, and this value is not used up in the exchange. In fact, the art object needs to keep being received for the object to remain alive and valuable as art. A work of fiction — a short story, a novel — gains value when received by a reader, even if the imagined reader is the self. The words of the story, words on the page, are inert until enacted through reading, which is itself a creative or re-creative act.

Recently, I listened to a professional storyteller recount the traditional story of Cap O'Rushes to a group of high school students, a story that is a mash-up of King Lear and Cinderella and which the storyteller claimed was Shakespeare's favourite story. After his recounting, the storyteller asked the students, "What colour was Cap O'Rushes' dress?" Some said pink, some blue. Some were quite specific in their descriptions of the dress: long and flowing gown, cinched waist, puffed sleeves. Of course, he hadn't told his listeners anything about her dress at all, other than that she wore one. The students admitted that they weren't used to being told stories. The storyteller was eager to point out the collaborative nature of what they were up to. Listening to a story or reading it is not like receiving a story through the visual media of

television or movies; in the latter cases, the images of the narrative are provided for us, in the former we create them ourselves.

The receiver of gossip is also an active participant and collaborator whose work parallels that of the listener to or reader of a story. This is why I'll also assert that gossip doesn't exist in a visual medium. Taking paparazzi photographs isn't gossip. People talking in a visual medium (on film) could be a means of transmitting gossip only the transmission doesn't occur because we're looking but because we're listening to them.

I want to further consider what we do when we listen to stories, and specifically what happens in our brains when we read fictional narratives that invite us to enter them imaginatively, to recreate and inhabit a world in our heads.

Fiction makes us animate an imagined world. Philosopher Elaine Scarry in her work, *Dreaming by the Book*, examines how as readers we respond to the words of a story as to a series of instructions. These instructions are most potent when we are invited to set a three-dimensional world in motion, when the writer pays attention to such qualities as depth of field, the kinetic, and the various sensory stimulae that we receive through our bodies. Fiction isn't by definition about other people but generally is: we see characters move through the world and enter their bodies and consciousnesses depending on the degree of interiority offered by the author, by our own empathetic capacities and willingness to enter others.

There's been a lot of attention recently on neuroscientific studies of what happens to us when we read fiction. An article in *The New York Times Magazine* highlighted the work of University of Toronto's emeritus professor of psychology and novelist Keith Oatley and York University psychologist Raymond Mar. Reading fiction activates the same neural networks as if we were actually moving our leg or inhaling a scent; we become imaginatively embodied. Mar's fMRI studies demonstrate fiction reading's ability to activate the same neural networks that we use in life when navigating social situations as we try to figure out how other people are likely to respond. Reading fiction, many headlines have trumpeted, increases empathy, our ability to imagine ourselves as others, into others: we are neurally changed, becoming more like whatever we imagine ourselves doing or being.

This doesn't occur when we read documentary accounts of the same events, when we are not invited to recreate them imaginatively. And studies on inference (Bortolucci & Dixon, 2003, cited by Keith Oatley, 2012) have shown that if the narrative account is too explicit about its emotional content, over-tells it, the empathetic engagement is less strong. As readers, we are more engaged if we're forced to guess and intuit what others are feeling or thinking, since this is what we're continually doing in life.

Similarly, gossip offers us story, rather than information: we respond to it as story rather than information. The mini-narratives of gossip often take the form of: so-and-so did this, or didn't do this. Archetypal gossip narratives have to do with having a baby, getting married, cheating on a spouse, the breakdown of a relationship, behaving badly or getting caught behaving badly (soliciting a prostitute, for instance), engaging in a deviant sexual practice, drinking too much, doing too many drugs. They require some element of surprise if not of transgression and relate to behaviours in the private sphere.

Listening to gossip, we imagine others doing these things: we animate those we gossip about, create bodies for them, alternate bodies, story bodies one might call them.

Gossip may come, like the best stories, with vivid detail but not necessarily verifiable detail. As its readers or listeners, we believe it, in the manner of stories, not based on our ability to adhere it to fact, but because believing it is desirable (it's a good story), and its elements of surprise and transgression give us pleasure. The desirability of belief can bring about an

imagined intimacy with the one being gossiped about, as we recreate their body and animate it in story, in the same way that dreaming of a celebrity can make the stranger feel intimately known.

Gossip narratives are often truncated: A's having B's baby; his wife found his lover's text message on his cellphone. There's mystery, both because details can't be verified and we get just the highlights. Mystery offers more room for inference, which in turn offers more room for imaginative engagement, and also room for judgement of those whose behaviour we disapprove of. As gossip's recipients, we continue the narrative ourselves, attempt to create causal connective tissue, to figure out why A or B did this, or what led from that to this, or, particularly if we refuse empathically to enter the judged transgressors, we extend our sense of empathetic connection to those surrounding them. How do A's other children feel? And what about B's wife? We create what you might call a spatial narrative from a web of social connections.

Isn't it dangerous to respond to stories of real people as if they were fictions? Imagined bodies can still be hurt.

Yes, gossip is potentially dangerous and a kind of theft, a body-snatching, in the same way that all story-telling is a form of theft.

Gossip creates a triangulated relationship between the one spoken about, the one speaking and the recipient of the gossip. There's power and pleasure both in the telling of gossip and in the receiving of it: the power of privileged access and the possibility of extending that access. But the speaker of gossip, like any storyteller, speaks out of need: the need to pass the story on is a need to set the story in motion, for the story gains life by being animated and activated through transmission. The need to tell is also a need to be witnessed. The gossiper needs to have her recreation of the story and her own response to it witnessed by another; the listener/witness confirms the truth of the story not as a factual truth but as a good story and confirms the teller's shock or horror or delight as real.

In an era of the endless public self-promotions and self-disclosures of social media, is there room for gossip? Yes, in so far as the power of secrets, like the lure of narrative itself, is not about to disappear, and perhaps an excess of the performative will create a subterrain for true gossip. Let us simply be aware of what we do when we gossip, be able to isolate the register of "wanting something to be true" from "it is true." Let us recognize the theft of others' bodies, and our turning them into imagined bodies, as a pleasurable theft that is a little like what the creators of fan fiction do. Perhaps thinking of receiving of gossip as a form of creative reading can allow us to think of fiction itself not as escape but as a way in which we make ourselves and make the world.

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