

Gossip's ephemeral longevity: Power, circulation, and new media

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Abstract

This essay argues that gossip reveals cultural networks that can support a range of functions, whether celebrity visibility, crowd-sourced anonymity, or anti-colonial revolt. Examining gossip through interdisciplinary scholarship in subaltern studies, psychology, literary criticism, media studies, and history, the essay elaborates its imbrication in these cultural networks along with its role in the creation of new media forms. The first part of the essay traces the semantic permutations of 'gossip' alongside related terms, elucidating gossip's function as a network builder and didactic mode via new media. The second part offers a series of non-exhaustive case studies from the 1600s to the present that demonstrate gossip's role in creating new connected publics, exerting social pressure, providing protection, and offering resistance against established institutions. This transhistorical perspective for considering gossip in relation to print and digital media brings together eighteenth-century periodicals, the #FreeBritney campaign for Britney Spears, the 'Shitty Media Men' spreadsheet, and slave revolts. By examining how 'ephemeral' gossip creates material outcomes, the essay shows how gossip works while illuminating its contradictory designations of trivial irrelevance and dangerous power.

Keywords: information networks, rumor transmission, gossip magazines, celebrity history, eighteenth-century periodicals

In 2021 alone it was called ‘a pernicious social ill’, ‘not a sin’, *and* ‘a bond that makes us human’.[1] Touted as the way to reconnect with others or earn trust, it can also destroy relationships.[2] It comes in a variety of types, including ‘epidemic’, ‘confidential’, and influential. Lizzo and Cardi B sang about it, *Selling Sunset* capitalised on it, and here I am writing about it.[3]

Gossip is a topic rife with contradictions. On the one hand, people dismiss gossip as idle and trifling. Yet they also view it as a major threat to individual and societal well-being, necessitating sanction and control. As a bad habit, a paid profession, or a delicious entertainment, gossip serves as an important tool across the centuries to solicit interest in a written or spoken narrative. We want to know who is sleeping with whom, who strayed outside of social norms, what corruption lurks below the surface. Gossip gets leveraged as the ‘real’ story, but often remains disavowed as a method of legitimate knowledge production. The ease with which gossip transcends genres, gender, and even temporality makes it slippery to define, let alone analyse. One reason why gossip retains its bad reputation is that it helps those outside traditional power structures find ways to fight back. It can, however, also reinforce dominant norms, preserving insider/outsider divides and acting as a coercive, destructive force. With its particular, elusive, and formally malleable structure, it is no wonder that gossip becomes a punching bag for information transfer, a space where non-credible and/or important information goes to be contained, but also to escape, be whispered out of turn, or tweeted late at night.

I argue that gossip reveals the cultural networks that support celebrity, crowd-sourced anonymity, and revolt, demonstrating a transhistorical function that better illuminates its contradictory designations of trivial irrelevance and dangerous power. Starting with the advent of mechanically replicated texts in the late 1600s, I demonstrate how technologies expand gossip’s orbit when compared to its oral, in-person circulations. ‘Text’ here means content replicated by machines, from pages to screens. The advent of new media forms, which traverse analogue print publications and digital interfaces, enhances gossip’s potential for mutual aid and defiance as well as its didactic and social grooming functions, regardless of place or period. A grounded, more historically nuanced understanding of what gossip is and does further offers a framework for other comparative, transnational, and transhistorical scholarly work through this omnipresent mode.

Toward that end, I first examine what gossip is and does via a conceptual history, drawing on related terms, then articulate its functions as a didactic mode and network

builder. This essay's second part puts my larger claim into practice, examining how gossip illuminates the underlying networks that drive three cultural domains: celebrity, crowd-sourced anonymity, and revolt. My transhistorical approach offers a series of non-exhaustive case studies from the 1600s through the present, establishing the advantages of a *longue durée* perspective when considering both gossip and media.

Just what is gossip anyway?

The word 'gossip' can refer to a person, a type of communication, and/or a process of information exchange. Gossip creates circuits between two or more people. It can be spoken, written, or read, remediating between these forms with relative ease, something that today's thriving, interconnected social media networks illustrate better than ever before. It 'tends to occupy private spaces' and 'implies the absence' of those under discussion.[4] Gossip itself can be factually accurate, an outright falsehood, or a mix. But no matter where gossip falls on the fact spectrum, it can never be fully dismissed. Gossip lingers. As Patricia Meyer Spacks writes, 'If gossip is merely contemptible, why have so many people said so much about it?'[5]

Gossip's meanings as a subject, object, and process merit close attention. As a noun, the word comes from the Old English *godsib*, a sponsor (of either gender) at a baptism. Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary gives broader definitions beyond this origin, including a familiar acquaintance or 'tippling companion', a woman who attends at a birth, and/or a person who delights in idle talk.[6] Though gossip's origins in god sibling and women assisting a birth are frequently mentioned, few critics probe these other, non-gendered valences of drinking and friendship, though they clearly point to gossip as a heterosocial activity. Additionally, the *Oxford English Dictionary* examples of gossip (the verb) as exchanging 'idle' talk about other people date from the 1600s. However, despite the ample evidence that gossip is a practice everyone does, whatever the part of speech, gossip repeatedly carries gendered negative moral judgements about women's talk.

The connection between birth and women's talk grounds gossip's bad reputation well beyond the English language. For example, in Spanish *la comadre* is also a gossip or midwife. The first edition of the French *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694) defines *le caquet* with similar negative connotations: it is the sound a hen makes or the 'babble' of women during a birth. The connection to birth – whether baptism

sponsorship or women attending a labouring mother – connects gossip to other processes of creation, even when trivialised as a mere animal function. This creation can be of community, of knowledge, of entertainment, of content, all extending our understanding of the networks that drive them. In fact, the creation of new media forms throughout history consistently leverages gossip's mechanisms. From early print periodicals to recent digital technologies, new media always 'exist at the bleeding edge of obsolescence' as 'forms of accelerated capitalism' striving to habituate consumers to their novelty.[7] New media affordances change over time; weekly newspapers, for example, operate quite differently than today's 24-hour barrage of online posts. However, all new media aim to draw us in and make us care about total strangers (both real and fictional), often because of what we can learn about ourselves and others in the process.

Incorporating the classical and medieval notion of fama and Claire Brant's notion of the 'choric' enriches a transhistorical view of gossip. Fama's cognates and derivatives describe a concept cluster that exceeds 'fame', encompassing our current notions of public opinion, idle talk, rumour, reputation, information, news, infamy, and defamation.[8] When discussing eighteenth-century scandal and law, Brant defines the 'choric' as a concept that covers multiple 'processes and products, including collective discourses' and 'social constructions of identity such as character'. The choric also names a mode of anonymous plurality; it 'refers to plural originators of discourse', both spoken and written, 'without suggesting that those voices are necessarily in unison or can be named'.[9] All these modes function together in an economy where distinctions between the personal and public dissolve. Although both fama and choric have roots in Anglo-European contexts, scholars examining gossip's complexity draw on similar conceptual frameworks around the world, from the Caribbean to Africa to South Asia.[10] Taken together, these concepts reveal the operations of reputation and public opinion creation, expanding the possibilities for recognising gossip's accretion over the centuries, whether in 1720 or 2020.

Gossip's many functions: Networks, information circuits, and social control

As a process, gossip creates new media forms, shapes communities, and destroys reputations. Wendy Chun posits that new media forms have power 'because they mess with the distinction between publicity and privacy, gossip and political speech, surveillance and entertainment, intimacy and work, hype and reality'.[11] Gossip's power to blur boundaries is another of its key features, since at times truth is not even

the point; the pleasure of connecting is what matters. Like Johnson's example of people sharing drinks and conversation, gossip today conjures the small intimacies of people chatting over the back fence or on the front stoop, in the long-running group text or on the playground. Different from 'the indiscriminate spilling of secrets' that signals a breach of trust, gossip – when a discussion of second or thirdhand knowledge about 'minor social grievances' – forms a pleasurable space to build or strengthen pre-existing connections between people.[12]

Gossip's connective power both creates networks and runs along pre-established circuits of connection. Network may be a modern term, but the concept has a long cultural history that complicates our current associations of a web-based internet with countless nodes of connectivity. As Alexander R. Galloway explains, networks have long oscillated between two 'related but incompatible formal structures': a 'chain of triumph' and a 'web of ruin'. Where the chain is directional, following a hierarchical command structure to constitute a desired reality, the 'nonlinear mesh' of the web is 'designed to ensnare and delimit', always remaining 'unknowable in quality and innumerable in form'.[13] Though judged in the past as a threat to centralised control, today 'the web is perceived as entirely vital, even necessary' and has 'finally outclassed' the chain for 'hegemonic' and 'progressive political movements' alike.[14] However, this decentralised norm in no way means networks remain antagonistic to authority and traditional power structures; instead they often 'reify power along different lines' since 'traditional arbiters of power' have learned 'how to harness network effects to their own advantage'.[15] In other words, though decentralised resistance is rhizomatic in form, it does not guarantee liberation from long-established hierarchies.[16] Relatedly, electronic networks have changed how personal networks get formed and grow, allowing gossip new ways to easily cross 'boundaries between different social groups and networks'.[17] Yet while social media may have the possibilities of a 'revolutionising force', it also rests on capitalist corporate entities looking to expand and profit from their user base.[18]

Gossip functions as a network builder across a variety of power structures. Karen Adkins reminds us how 'those who already have public authority and credibility use the tools of gossip to demean and diminish their critics' but call those techniques by other names, such as "news," "reports about the profession," or anonymous sourcing'.[19] This 'invisible gossip' directly points to gossip's power across space, place, and time. As Adkins and others posit, moves to devalue and isolate gossip as a trivial, malicious act that *only* women commit coincides with the growth of print culture and literacy rates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in part because

'gossip, more than other oral practices, reminds us of the incomplete and illusory nature of the print world'.[20] Print strives to function as the way to 'information, authority, credibility' but gossip mutters on the side lines, 'debunking' and 'revealing what doesn't fit or is out of place (whether it be a person, action, value, or institutional position)'.[21] However, having access to insider gossip usually functions to reinforce one's own proximity to power, regardless of gender identity. Gossip thus operates as both a way to maintain power and allow the disenfranchised to gain more autonomy.

Furthermore, gossip provides a broader umbrella category for the circuits and channels through which rumors, secrets, scandal, and even news circulate, shifting from micro-circuits to larger exchanges. Instead of discrete pieces, gossip has a processual nature. Able to exist unmoored from specifics, gossip can also, like rumors, gain narrative power through retelling and repetition. While gossip and rumor are closely related, they are not perfect synonyms. Gossip blends characteristics of news – reportage taken as factual truth that has an origin point or traceable author – and rumor, which 'is necessarily anonymous' with 'its origin unknown'.[22] Gossip provides the circuit where rumors travel. Rumors themselves are claims that can be somehow proven or disproven. Gossip has no origin and no end, so it is harder to pin down as it floats around, a mode Karma Lochrie calls 'always secondhand and always roving'.[23] Gossip's transmission mirrors a rumor's movement, which passes on 'from a teller to a hearer' who then becomes a teller, making 'the encoding and decoding of rumour' collapse together 'at each point of its relay'.[24] Gossip and rumor thus function via anonymity and transitivity, often leading to wider transmissions that get labelled 'news' once more verified and widely circulated.

While gossip as a process remains 'amorphous and wide-ranging, seeming to circulate without any specific aim' in ways that can drive social change, this process also helps reinforce social norms.[25] Take the concept of scandal. As Cecil Graham in Oscar Wilde's 1893 play *Lady Windermere's Fan* explains,

gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.[26]

Here gossip appears a fun, delightful practice that is simply another form of history creation; scandal, meanwhile, transforms gossip's glee into a social control mechanism that automatically reinforces dominant morals. More broadly, scandals are event-driven and only happen if people flout conventions (usually connected to sexuality or honesty), providing an opportunity for moral judgement.

As with rumors, most scandals move along gossip's circuits, but not all gossip is scandal. According to Brant, scandal 'employs paradigms of likeness and difference' to 'establish and regulate race, class and gender boundaries', particularly for women.[27] While gossip can assert values and define community standards with an aim to discipline people, scandal always carries the idea that transgressors of social conventions should suffer.[28] Yet both scandal and gossip provide people a relatively safe environment to practice social judgement since people can destroy others' reputations (often while not hurting their own), underlining gossip's didactic and monitory modes as methods that reinforce social norms.

Evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar posits gossip as a grooming behaviour that creates group cohesion and community, claiming that 'language evolved to allow us to gossip' as a more efficient means of connecting than the hours physical grooming requires.[29] He emphasises gossip's function as a tool to warn others and strengthen social bonds, a quality I see as greatly enhanced by the advent of mechanical text reproduction.[30] Texts mechanically replicated on pages or screens – including books, newspapers, periodicals, tweets, blog posts, etc. – allow social bonds and information to move beyond physical proximity. Regardless of a text's specific materiality, these forms enhance gossip's range and durability for centuries by circulating beyond their initial audiences. In fact, such textual circulations help constitute publics and counterpublics. As Michael Warner posits, 'the concatenation of texts through time' extend beyond a singular text or media; these texts 'have an ongoing life' and 'address indefinite strangers', creating the intertextuality and other bonds all publics require.[31] Bonding together aside, grooming further extends to the word's other meaning: to prepare someone for a particular purpose. Gossip thus prepares for, warns of, and reinforces dominant norms even as it gives those with less social power a means to circulate otherwise inaccessible information with the potential to contest or subvert those self-same norms.

Recognising gossip's role makes visible systems of information as power for all kinds of people, often highlighting less obvious, even unexpected, connections within communities. One way to see these networks is to trace gossip's rhizomatic information transfer, locating where and/or when people share information that gets passed along elsewhere; this transfer then permutates and perhaps shifts again. But focusing only on the transference process misses gossip's driving motivator. As Luise White explains, the purpose of 'gossiping, rumormongering, and even talking is not to deliver information but to discuss it'.[32] People want to talk about topics that

resonate with them. They want to mull over potential reasons for other people's actions and consider possible outcomes, even if the topic under discussion seemingly has little to do with their own lives. This considered circulation produces a churn of information much like Homi K. Bhabha's figuration of rumor, one that 'produces an infectious ambivalence' of both 'too much meaning and a certain meaninglessness'.^[33] Though meaning itself can threaten to collapse in the face of *too* much information, White offers a method for handling all these transmissions. For example, when examining rumors of vampiric firefighters and other seemingly fantastic figures in colonial Africa, White approaches all the stories as valid history. In other words, the best way forward is to collect as many variations of stories as possible, then trace out the debates, 'public discussions', and 'arguments about the issues' by looking at everything together since the variations 'were neither told in isolation nor recounted without contradiction or correction'.^[34] Thinking through collective knowledge, whether factually accurate or not, allows for a clearer understanding of a community's issues and values. It also makes it possible to trace connections across social spheres that appear wildly different when gossip creates a new network among strangers and demonstrates how knowledge production moves into realms with more obvious power, as is the case with the recent #FreeBritney movement.

Gossip and celebrity

Gossip and celebrity share historical roots. Both terms etymologically link with the concept of *fama* and have shifted their former sacred or spiritual meanings into contemporary secular concepts, though scholars differ in locating exactly when today's concept of celebrity began. A 'celebrity' is someone well-known, tied to 'cultures of commodification', with the concept resting on new 'modes of media production' and 'ideologies of consumption'.^[35]

Take, for instance, the case of American pop star Britney Spears and the hashtag #FreeBritney, which illustrates how gossip supports celebrity creation and can create a networked public of strangers. Some background: Spears came to fame in the late 1990s and was a ubiquitous media presence throughout the early 2000s. Everything she did, from walking her dog to releasing a new album, seemed worth a headline. In 2006 Spears' apparent mental health problems put her under a temporary conservatorship, made permanent later that same year, with her father Jamie Spears at the helm wielding complete control over her finances and personal affairs. She continued to perform, released albums, and even had a Las Vegas residency for four years. In 2019 she stopped posting on Instagram for three months and reports started

to circulate that she was in a mental health facility. That April, *Britney's Gram* (a podcast launched in 2017 that analysed Spears' Instagram posts) received a shocking voicemail from 'a credible source' saying that Spears was being held in the facility against her will.[36] And the #FreeBritney campaign officially begins.

Throughout 2019 and 2020 #FreeBritney circulated across social media platforms and inspired multiple in-person rallies and protests while Jamie called the movement a 'joke' and 'conspiracy theory'.[37] 2021 saw the release of multiple documentaries – the *New York Times*-produced *Framing Britney Spears* and its follow-up *Controlling Britney Spears*, plus Netflix's *Britney vs Spears* and the BBC's *The Battle for Britney* – and other mainstream media outlets continued to question the authenticity of the #FreeBritney claims and sourcing.[38] Exposés appeared in mainstream publications like the *New York Times* and *New Yorker*; Spears also talked in open court about the abuse and suffering she was experiencing under the conservatorship.[39] In November 2021 the court approved Jamie's earlier petition to terminate the conservatorship and Spears regained control of her autonomy, body, and money. February 2022 brought news of a forthcoming memoir, followed by Instagram announcements of Spears' third pregnancy in April and subsequent miscarriage in May.



Fig. 1: Spears announces her legal freedom on Twitter, 12 November 2021.

In this example, gossip performs two distinct functions: creating a connected public and exerting social pressure. First, #FreeBritney shows how gossip fashions networks of connection that bring together strangers and pre-existing circuits alike. Writing before the launch of Facebook, Twitter, or even Friendster, Michael Warner says that 'public figures who do not belong to the social network made by gossiping' are the 'apparent exception' to gossip never being a 'relation among strangers'.^[40] However, Spears is just one example from today's social media landscape that disproves this claim. Here Spears functions as origin node for the decentralised network that comes into being from #FreeBritney to #FreedBritney, where gossip functions as the connector to build a public that leverages celebrity to make real change. Plenty of other twenty-first-century cases show how celebrity figures can both create networks of strangers and be part of those same networks given the affordances of Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc.

Spears' road to regaining control of her body and finances also establishes how the circulation of gossip, aided by rumors and speculation, can accrete into information that mainstream media sources can no longer ignore, spotlighting gossip's function as social pressure. Spears has fuelled commodified gossip for decades, acting as 'the great test case of the hyper-invasive, rule-free, often amateur-run celebrity-gossip blogs which began their ascendance almost exactly when she did' in the early 2000s, as well as the mainstream media.^[41] From a topic of gossip derided by the same media machine that has profited off her life narrated on their terms, Spears becomes news with a capital N, a serious symbol of a broken system not actually meant for people in her situation but that she could not escape for thirteen years. In other words, the network of a fairly disparate group of people – including superfans, legal experts, podcasting comedians – made enough noise, through non-'legitimised' news and channels of gossip, that they could not be ignored. The result was that a ruling Spears herself had requested multiple times be reversed actually was. Spears openly acknowledges her fans' role in ending the conservatorship, underlining how having information come from seemingly everywhere is much harder to ignore.

Approaching gossip and new media from a transhistorical view reveals multiple overlaps between phenomena such as Spears' case and the celebrity gossip of the past, including what kinds of stories are being told, how they are sourced, and the responses they generate. Whether periodicals in the 1700s or social media posts in the 2020s, these forms use similar gambits to commodify stories and sell content back to wider audiences who pay with money and/or their attention.

Today's constant churn of celebrity stories thus has deep roots in earlier new media forms such as broadside ballads, pamphlets, and periodicals, particularly when it comes to dissecting failing romantic relationships. Most of this coverage (reality shows excepted) happens without the subjects' explicit permission, though sometimes names are omitted or parts of a photo are blacked out to avoid prosecution. Thus, long before the paparazzi started chasing down Spears or a Kardashian out on a date, print media was selling images and stories of famous couples covered by only a thin veneer of anonymity. For example, London's long-running monthly *Town and Country Magazine* (1769–1795) included regular *tête-à-tête* reporting on affairs in the bon ton (i.e. the fashionable, mostly upper-class, world). Every issue between 1769 and 1792 included an instalment of the 'Histories of the *Tete-à-Tete* annexed', detailing a specific heterosexual relationship's often-scandalous history with custom engravings of the subjects facing each other. Most of these 312 features were submissions from anonymous reader correspondents with the magazine.[42] To circumvent libel laws no names are included, but the texts give enough clues for readers to guess their subjects, perhaps using first initials or a descriptive pseudonym. For example, the *Tete-à-Tete* for February 1770 concerns 'The Father of the City' and his mistress 'Mrs. T——s', giving their backstories and describing their ongoing relationship with plenty of double entendres.[43] The piece nods to people who can fill in the blanks and provides enough to engage readers today with no knowledge of its subjects, demonstrating gossip's enduring power via print.



Fig. 2: February 1770 *Tete-à-Tete* engravings, via Google Books.

Although today's saturated digital space offers different affordances for both content and anonymous sourcing, this *Tete-à-Tete* coverage resembles multiple entertainment

news websites that depend on celebrities and sell others' stories without their permission, turning gossip into profit. Celebrity-focused website TMZ (est. 2005), for example, credits its 'meteoric rise' to three entertainment news stories it broke, including Spears filing for divorce from Kevin Federline. Its ongoing coverage often features Photoshopped images of former couples, their faces almost looking at one another directly with a layout echoing that of the earlier *Tete-à-Tetes*.^[44]

Other celebrity-fuelled media sites like The Shade Room (est. 2014) also directly elicit contributions from their readers, asking for tips – from mundane sightings to insider information about extracurricular sexual activities that sound very similar to Mrs. T—'s desires.^[45] While tipsters might get paid or otherwise acknowledged for their contributions, the subjects of these stories are firmly commodified for the publishers' profit, reinforcing gossip's role in driving celebrity, providing content, and attracting readers across the centuries.^[46]

Gossip and crowd-sourced anonymity

Tipsters, both past and present, amplify the role of anonymity as indication of (likely) authenticity. Just think of how many 'sources close to X' with inside information show up in reporting connected to the rich or famous. This trope of reliable anonymity appears throughout press coverage then and now, often with similar syntax. The total elision of sourcing frequently appears via passive voice, indicating a collective authorship of the claims. With the source completely obscured, it becomes unclear if a claim came from just one person or is already circulating as general knowledge. Crowd-sourced anonymity thus becomes a paradoxical sign of authenticity, allowing that content to be sold back to a wider audience who pay with money and/or their attention.

Anonymity relies on a network that is difficult to pierce without the assistance of gossip's circuits and remediation function. These repetitions – oral, retweeted, or reprinted – accrete to create authority, while their origins remain unknown and temporally distant. For example, getting specific when describing anonymous sources, such as 'five West Wing aides' or 'senior officials', is a common twenty-first century rhetorical move that provides credibility alongside anonymity.^[47] This anonymity protects people's jobs and provides a fuller behind-the-scenes picture to a general public, further demonstrating how the differentiation between news and gossip often falls apart under closer examination. As Adkins argues, 'gossip's entanglement with

power means that we are selective, and self-serving, about even recognising its appearance and our uses of it.’[48] The resulting circulations act as commodities for their transmitters, whether individuals building social capital, publications gaining subscriptions and unit sales, or social media accounts profiting from clicks, reshares, and advertising revenue.

Yet gossip’s anonymity and collective functions have served those on the margins for centuries, providing them protection from dominant instruments of social control. A contemporary example of gossip and crowd-sourced anonymity that shows gossip’s prophylactic function is the ‘Shitty Media Men’ spreadsheet created in October 2017 by Moira Donegan and other anonymous contributors. This document aimed to create a space for women in media to share information about men who had sexually assaulted or otherwise harassed them, thus protecting other women from similar experiences. Here gossip moved to a digital form and spread beyond expectation; the live, anonymously editable page was taken down in less than twelve hours. Donegan herself explains that she made a Google spreadsheet because oral ‘whisper networks’ can be ‘elitist’ and ‘insular’, frequently excluding women of colour, so this method allowed for wider information spread.[49] Again, the point of this short-lived network node was not to topple the powerful, in part because ‘the consequences almost never outweigh the price that women pay for coming forward’, but to protect others from having their ‘reputations’ be ‘maligned’ or their ‘victimhood called into question’.[50] In an even more meta moment, Donegan publicly came forward as the list’s creator in January 2018 after rumors circulated that *Harper’s* was going to publish an exposé naming those involved in the list’s creation. The document’s opening disclaimer stated it was ‘only a collection of misconduct allegations and rumors’ and to ‘take everything with a grain of salt’, a sign of the anonymous crowd-sourcing that was both the list’s strength and downfall. As Jenna Wortham explains, the list exploded ‘power and labor dynamics’, since now ‘once privileged’ information ‘became decentralized and accessible to all’.[51]

The screenshot shows a Google Sheet titled "SHITTY MEDIA MEN". The sheet has four columns: A, B, C, and D. Row 1 contains a disclaimer in column A, a note about editing in column B, and a note about logging out in column C. Row 2 contains the headers for a table: "LAST NAME", "FIRST NAME", "AFFILIATION", and "ALLEGED MISCONDUCT". Rows 3 through 15 contain redacted information, with some rows showing a red background and others showing a blurred image.

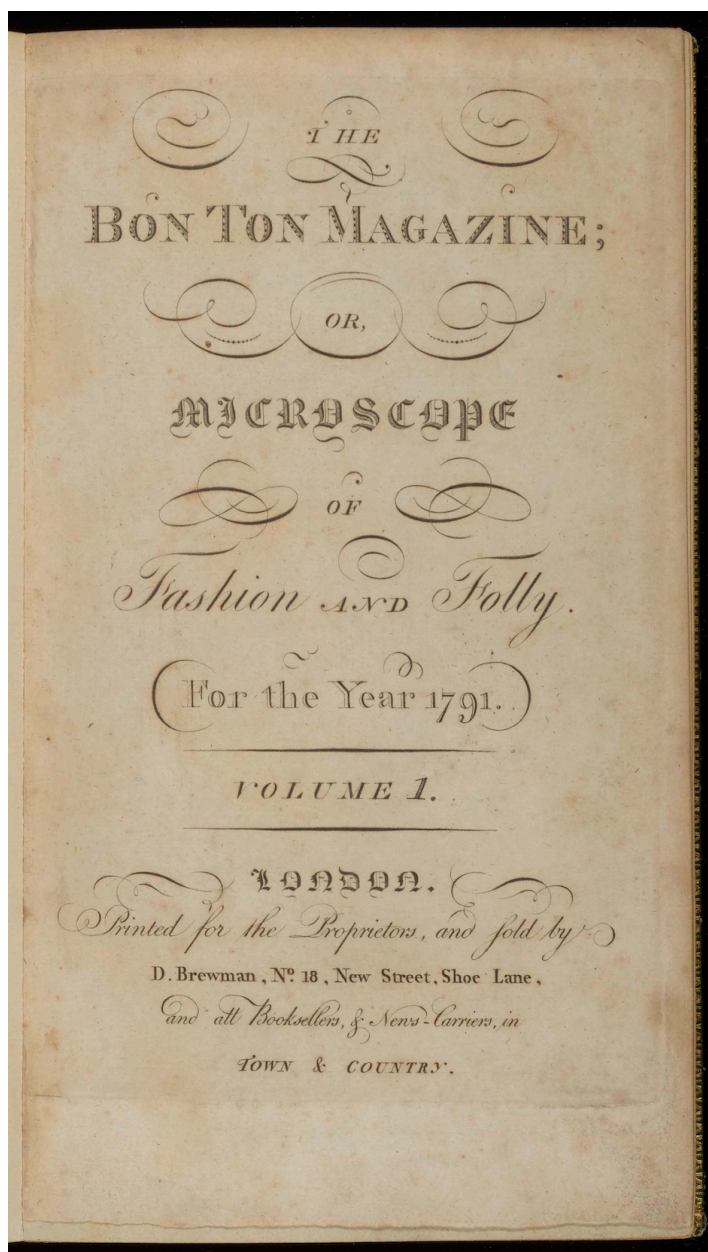
	A	B	C	D
1	DISCLAIMER: This document is only a collection of misconduct allegations and rumors. Take everything with a grain of salt. If you see a man you're friends with, don't freak out.	Men accused of physical sexual violence by multiple women are highlighted in red.	***You can edit anonymously by logging out of your gmail.** Please never name an accuser, and please never share this document with a man.	
2	LAST NAME	FIRST NAME	AFFILIATION	ALLEGED MISCONDUCT
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				

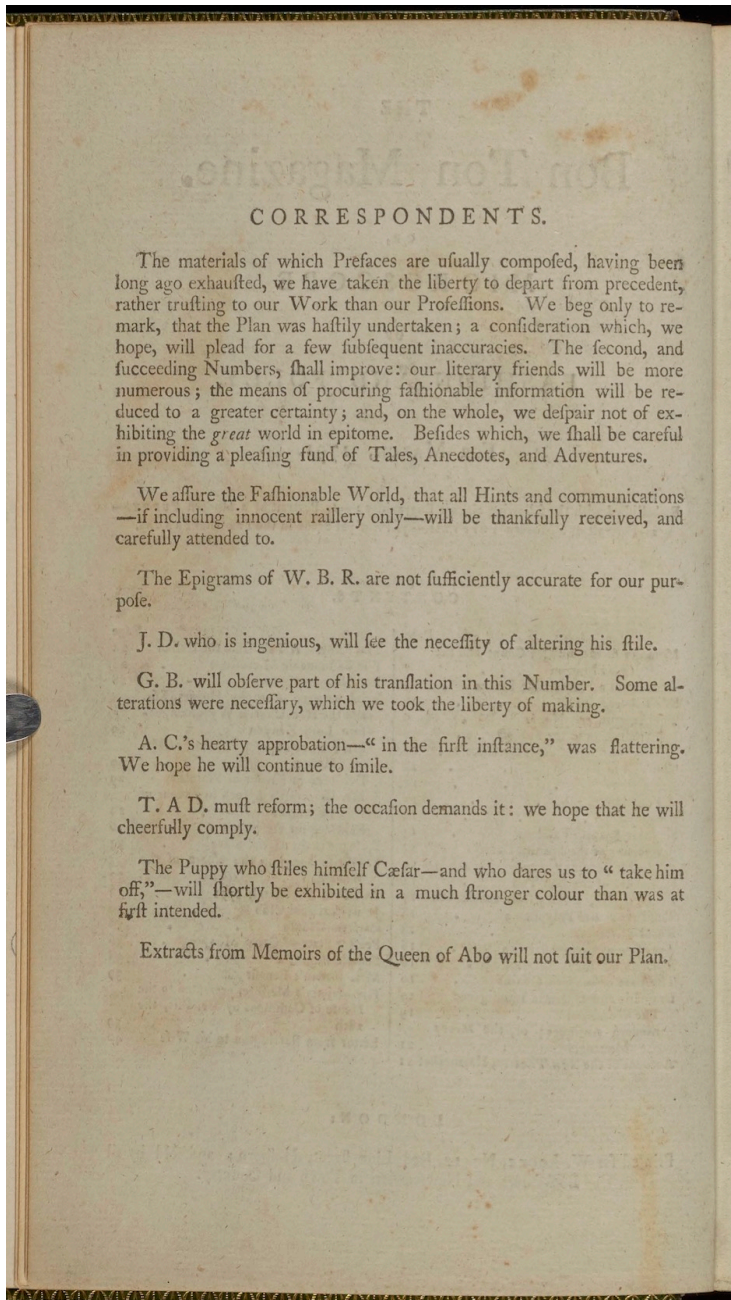
Fig. 3: Shitty Media Men list screenshot, via *New York Magazine*.

Women have used whisper networks to help each other avoid sexual harassment and assault for centuries, their necessity highlighting the structures that systematically devalue women instead of protecting them from harm. Maria Verena Peters' analysis of hashtag feminism suggests that social media – 'in spite of the risk of online vitriol' – offers 'a hybrid space that feels private and anonymous', yet is also 'very public' and only requires 'a low inhibition threshold' for interactions, mirroring the affordances the 'Shitty Media Men' spreadsheet aspired to employ.[52] Though attempting to create a counterpublic via 'an address to indefinite strangers', putting this list online meant that more people who were not its intended audience now had access, leading to a media frenzy.[53] This frenzy also demonstrates how once a controllable media or communication network 'exceeds a certain size', control of any kind becomes impossible.[54]

Unmoored, the list demonstrates gossip's ever-present possibility of unreliability alongside its power to make change and/or cause harm. Its impacts continue – a man named on the list filed suit against Donegan for defamation in October 2018, though as of April 2022 that case has not yet gone to trial – and highlight how an object that actively existed for less than a full day can cause people to lose their jobs and reputations.[55] We are now back to Galloway's amorphous 'web of ruin' and its ever-present threat to the status quo.

The anonymity of the crowd to source information, of course, has proven a steady way to supply content since the first periodicals and newspapers appeared in the seventeenth century, acting to engage audiences and provide the editors with content. Here, however, the editorial function still has control, preventing the unchecked proliferation that oral communications and unmoderated print and digital networks allow. For example, the first issue of *Bon Ton Magazine* (1791-1796) calls for contributions promising ‘the Fashionable World, that all Hints and communications ... will be thankfully received, and carefully attended to’, though editors will only treat non-vindictive submissions seriously.[56] In a similar fashion, TMZ’s header for every page contains a hyperlink to their tip submission form, which asks, ‘Got a hot news tip? Have photos or video of a breaking story?’ and assures readers that ‘tips are immediately forwarded to TMZ Staff’.[57] These calls for submissions create an avenue for limitless content that can be repackaged and further circulated, regardless of the period, where anonymity acts as a stamp of legitimacy on what is being communicated.





Figs 4, 5: from *Bon Ton Magazine*, March 1971. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.



Send TMZ a Hot Tip!

Got a hot news tip? Have photos or video of a breaking story? Be sure to include the following information: Your name, phone number, e-mail address, hometown, and a short caption that describes what is happening in your video/photo /audio and where and when it was taken.

Please fill out form. All hot tips are immediately forwarded to TMZ Staff.

Fig. 6: TMZ hot tips page.

Anonymity functions to protect sources, somewhat counterintuitively acts as a credibility amplifier, and demonstrates the power of unattached discourse, particularly when turning a profit. These examples highlight the potential dangers of women's talk as 'a power outlet' with 'subversive capacities' and gossip's status as 'urgent, consequential, and violent'.^[58] Depending on how and where it circulates, gossip can impact the life and death of reputations, careers, and even bodies.

Gossip and revolt

Gossip's potential to create change, perhaps its most threatening aspect, also means it operates as a critical networking tool of resistance with built-in anonymity, transitivity, and blurry origins. While this power has only increased with the new technologies and media of recent decades, gossip's possibilities for direct, substantive action appear in all kinds of rebellions across the centuries. For instance, Ranajit Guha discusses the role of transmission as part of insurgency in imperial India, underlining how all 'rebel messages' have 'the dual function of informing and mobilizing at the same time'.^[59] Although he discusses the physical transmission from village to village of symbols (including arrows, branches, and chapati) as signals for communal actions against the British colonisers during the 1857 rebellion in terms of rumour, gossip's wide-ranging ability to transfer rebellion or give those with less power a voice equally demonstrates its broader structural support for insurrection.^[60] This concluding example of eighteenth-century slave revolts highlights gossip's function as direct, violent resistance against powerful – and powerfully violent – institutions.

The analysis of over 36,000 transatlantic slave ship voyages shows that the more women who were onboard a slave ship, the more likely a slave revolt would occur. Rebecca Hall's archival research into these revolts provides the basis for the graphic narrative *Wake*, illustrated by Hugo Martínez, where Hall and Martínez combine the scant textual archives that remain with 'historical imagination' to tell narratives of multiple slave revolts on land in colonial New York and at sea.[61] Chapter 3, 'Some Hard Usage', gives a backstory for a 1712 slave revolt led by women in New York. Three pages show the message 'Meet at the well' transformed to just 'The well' as it passes from one to another while the slave women complete their daily shopping and other errands. This succinct code causes them to gather at night for a planning meeting, then put their plans into action, setting fires and confronting white colonists with weapons.

Some of the men and women involved killed themselves before capture, but 27 conspirators were condemned and 21 of them executed, with one woman's sentence suspended because she was pregnant.[62] Hall's work through the scant archives available show this woman remained in jail for years, while Governor Robert Hunter repeatedly asked for an official pardon that never seemed to come. Unofficial transmissions created a rebellion that both ended white and Black lives and caused the passing of more restrictive laws governing the enslaved, but official correspondence – at the mercy of transatlantic ship voyages and wheels of bureaucracy – failed to turn a governor's temporary reprieve into a pardon from the reigning British queen.[63]

Gossip powers rebellion, yet it easily disappears from the archive, much like the history of slave revolts. Frequently 'historical documents' say little 'about the role of enslaved women in revolts and rebellions', leaving most of them 'utterly erased from the colonial archive'.[64] Gossip's ephemerality offers a way into what Saidiya Hartman names 'critical fabulation', where narratives based on archival research (such as *Wake*) can offer possibilities to bridge the gaps and silences of voices that would otherwise remain forgotten.[65] Thus other scenes in *Wake* show women exchanging more information through gossip, including advice on which herb works as an abortifacient, signalling, whispering, and otherwise passing around details connected to upcoming acts of resistance.[66] The scenes from Chapter 8, 'The Insurrection of Cargo', represent women on a variety of slave ships preparing to rise up, taking advantage of their 'relative mobility' (since they were kept unchained, often with easy access to weapons and keys) 'to plan and initiate' countless revolts. For seven pages scenes of women talking and listening attentively appear across multiple ships, the included quotes from captain's logs illustrating how both crews and official policy

underestimated their agency, a move many later historians would unthinkingly duplicate.[67] Though in general 'both law and culture deemed the word of slaves untrustworthy and undeserving of recognition', the impacts of their speech could echo for generations even though their exact words cannot be recovered.[68] Gossip could spread to discredit elites or prepare a shipful of slaves for forthcoming signals to take over a vessel. These pages also powerfully illustrate Guha's claims about the transitive nature of rebellion, the functions of rumors, and the speed of such exchanges.[69] Most specific details of slave rebellions are lost to history, yet these examples clearly indicate how women's gossip happens in public spaces: performed as seemingly inconsequential chat, it retains a substantial capacity for subversion. Here gossip is the way to rebellion and dangerous to the status quo, inciting violence and death.

Conclusions

Attention to gossip's thematics, grammars, and media forms across the centuries reveals how gossip shapes the stories we consume, and those we tell ourselves, in particular and evocative ways. Ana Rodríguez Navas argues that gossip creates a battleground, 'a contested space where narratives of power and dissent vie for dominance', leaving no narrative 'ever safe from challenge and disruption'.[70] Gossip is an act of narrative control equally instrumentalised by dominant powers (that disavow the practice as they use its tools) *and* those seeking to build counternarratives and encourage resistance against those self-same powers. Dominant norms will further attempt to trivialise gossip they find threatening, calling it nonsense even if true, to promote their own interests and narratives. Yet gossip has great capacity for direct refusal and even dismantling of violent institutions. It also offers a way to grapple with many gaps we can just never fill, whether past or present.

Recognising gossip's cultural work in supporting celebrity, crowd-sourced anonymity, and revolt allows for a more robust understanding of fame, the attention economy, power's inner workings, and even why you listen to thirdhand stories about strangers. Gossip is deliciously forbidden and banally quotidian; an essential piece of community formation and fodder for mindless scrolling. Taken as a whole mode of circuits and rhizomatic networks that expand well beyond their origins, gossip constructs and impacts narrative form as well as content. Gossip might be 'characterized by rhetoric about exclusive knowledge' but thanks to textual replication technologies, that exclusivity no longer relies on physical or temporal proximity.[71] We can now gain a feeling of insider knowledge about people long dead or newly famous through these media forms, accessing people we will never actually know by purchasing a magazine,

paying for site subscriptions, or giving attention when scrolling Instagram. Transhistorical analysis allows us to see potentials in our own moment for networked resistance, be it Indian farmers protesting their government or Americans seeking equal access to reproductive rights. Gossip might help maintain social control, but it also provides tools to resist and subvert those norms. No wonder we cannot stop talking about it.

Author

Bethany E. Qualls is a PhD candidate in English literature at the University of California, Davis. Her dissertation argues that gossip's mechanisms power British eighteenth-century new media forms including engravings, periodicals, and novels. She was a 2018 Lewis Walpole Library Visiting Research Fellow and the 2019 American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Catherine Macaulay Prize winner for her work on prostitute Sally Salisbury, celebrity, and print media. As a Mellon Public Scholar in summer 2021 she worked on a project recovering women of metal type design with Letterform Archive. Recent publications include a co-authored introduction to Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* (Renard Press, 2021), a chapter in *A Spy on Eliza Haywood* (Routledge, 2021), and essays in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*.

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Notes

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- [62] Morgan 2021, p. 243.
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- [68] Kierner 2004, p. 68; Hall & Martínez 2021.
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