

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER

“Have you heard?”

An Examination of the Characteristics and Rhetorical Functions of Gossip on Facebook

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Abstract

Gossip serves as an informal control for maintaining social norms and increasing group cohesion in small, closely bonded groups; that is, until the context enters the world of social media. Gossip via social networking directly contributes to the creation and reinforcement of the norms and values of groups, and thereby has a direct impact on group and individual behavior. By looking at informal, evaluative communication strategies within social groups, more commonly known as gossip, this thesis will explore and discuss how gossip serves as an underlying regulator of norms and values within online social environments. In particular, this thesis will examine how and why gossip plays a role as an informal control strategy in the unfolding mode of online communication, and how informal social controls may grow in strength with the introduction of new technologies and the associated social complexities.

One of the key findings of this thesis is that gossip exists neither exclusively online nor exclusively offline, rather gossip online is complementary and supplementary to gossip in face-to-face interactions. Therefore, the rhetorical functions of traditional face-to-face gossip remain effective in online environments. Additionally, a second key finding is that privacy (or lack of privacy) is an important driver for the adaptive features of gossip in online environments.

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Ye Song of Ye Gossips

By Howard Pyle - 1885

1

One old maid,
And another old maid,
And another old maid--that's three--
And they were agossiping, I am afraid,
As they sat sipping their tea.

2

They talked of this,
And they talked of that,
In the usual gossiping way
Until everybody was black as your hat,
And the only ones white were they.

3

One old maid,
And another old maid,--
For the third had gone into the street--
Who talked in a way of that third old maid,
Which never would do to repeat.

4

And now but one
Dame sat all alone,
For the others were both away.
"I've never yet met," said she, with a groan,
"Such scandalous talkers as they."

5

"Alas! and alack!"
"We're all of a pack!"
For no matter how we walk,
Or what folk say to our face, our back
Is sure to breed gossip and talk."

Introduction: Have you heard?

The opening stanzas of a late 19th century children's poem characterize the traditional views of gossip: three old maids "agossiping." We can see from these lines how the traditional view of gossip—a highly gendered social event during which old maids drink tea and informally exchange evaluative, unofficial, trivial news about others—does not lend itself to rigorous academic inquiry. Traditionally, this viewpoint pervaded the academic as well as popular opinion on gossip. A long way from the 19th century view of three maids gossiping, gossip is now seen as something more. The influence and effectiveness of back channel chatter as an informal means of social control, and as means of establishing and maintaining collective norms and values, has been validated as an academic inquiry worth pursuing.

Consider, for example, Tunisia, December 17, 2010. An altercation between a police officer and a fruit-seller escalates when the police threaten to confiscate his cart without due process. The fruit seller, after being rejected by municipal officials when trying to submit a complaint, obtains a can of gasoline and sets himself on fire to protest a politically corrupt, self-interested government. This act of defiance sparks a national revolution that would eventually lead to the ousting of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali one month later.

Months after the event, the air is still filled with gossip about Mohamed Bouazizi—how many times his fruit cart was confiscated, who slapped whom during the altercation, who bribed whom, who extorted whom, who made slurs about whose father. Bouazizi did not live to see the effects of his sacrifice, but he and his acts of protest carry on in the collective memory of the Tunisian people and thousands of others worldwide who were following the events in Tunisia. His actions crystallized an inherent desire for fairness and

freedom. Ben Ali was “black as a hat” in the collective opinion of the Tunisian people, a reputation largely propagated and reinforced through the exchange of evaluative information on Facebook¹. But in this case we are seeing gossip not as the trivial chatter of old maids, but as something that legitimizes public action by allowing people to understand and reinforce the values that they desire for their society.

Facebook enabled the self-sacrificing fruit seller to become larger than life through gossip and other informal information exchanges, which in turn inspired youth in other countries to protest their repressive governments. Using Facebook as a means of transferring evaluative information through informal channels, the Tunisian youth have been able to organize around a key value—freedom—and incorporate this value into what they hold as a basic right.

In this thesis, I will argue that gossip via social networking directly contributes to the creation and reinforcement of the norms and values of groups, and thereby has a direct impact on group and individual behavior. By looking at informal, evaluative communication strategies within social groups, more commonly known as gossip, I will explore and discuss how gossip serves as an underlying regulator of norms and values within online social environments. In particular, this thesis will focus on gossip during a time of transition and technological change, such that the question becomes, what happens to gossip when it goes online?

The body of this thesis is composed of two main parts that are equally important for establishing how and why gossip exists as a rhetorical tool to maintain group cohesion and

¹ Facebook-savvy Tunisians, in the words of *New York Times* reporter Roger Cohen, used a social networking site, Facebook, to “... [propel] insurrection from the interior to the Tunisian capital in 28 days” (Cohen, 2011). The leaderless protesters coordinated, voted, evaluated and shared information via Facebook groups created for that purpose.

to establish, interpret, maintain and regulate social norms and values within bonded social groups.

The first part serves to outline the structural basis to gossip. It is important to understand what constitutes gossip and what characterizes gossip as a communicative genre in order to understand not only how it operates in traditional social groups, but also how it adapts to the online environment. In this section, we will be looking at communicative genres and characteristics of conversations in order to establish gossip as a communicative genre. We will then look at the eight characteristics that help to define gossip. Finally, at the end of Part I, I will discuss the evolution and nature of human social groups, as this too is necessary in order to understand how gossip serves its rhetorical functions, and how gossip operates online where social groups are organized in non-traditional ways.

Part II then examines how gossip serves five rhetorical functions: the interpretation of norms and values, the facilitation of social learning, the facilitation of group cohesion, the manipulation and control of reputations, and the mediation of cooperation and the policing of cheaters. I will examine how gossip plays a role as an informal control strategy, in addition to facilitating social cohesion in online social environments. We will see how informal social controls may grow in strength with the introduction of new technologies and the associated social complexity.

CHAPTER 1

What Others Are Saying: Literature Review

In the spirit of gossiping, let us take a moment to look at what others have been saying about gossip and thus provide a brief review of the academic discourse surrounding this subject. The role of gossip in society has been a subject of rising interest in the recent past among anthropologists, sociologists, socio-linguists, psychologists, social psychologists, human behaviorists and even evolutionary biologists. Most early qualitative research on gossip began appearing at the end of the 1960s with ethnographic studies, in addition to the more "arm-chair anthropologist" approach. Anthropologist Max Gluckman has been highly cited in academic literature on gossip as one of the first to introduce the idea of gossip serving as a social *function* benefitting the group as a whole with his article "Gossip and scandal" (Gluckman, 1963). Needless to say, this view point has been dubbed the "functionalist" approach to studying gossip (Barnard and Spencer, 2002).

In response to Gluckman's claim, Robert Paine wrote a 1967 article, "What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis" (Paine, 1967), which encompasses the "transactionalist" approach (Barnard and Spencer, 2002), which argues that gossip is used primarily to serve individual aims and interests, and thereby the individual can manipulate norms and values in his or her favor. (See also McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002.)

Then, in 1977, John Haviland published a piece, "Gossip, reputation, and knowledge in Zinacantan" (Haviland, 1977), which described how gossip, as an act of everyday life, helps to continuously negotiate norms and values. This approach, known as the "symbolic-interactionist approach" (Barnard and Spencer, 2002), in many ways ties Gluckman and Paine's arguments together such that gossip contributes to both group-serving and individual-serving ends. Researchers such as David Sloan Wilson and Robin Dunbar have

since taken the study of gossip from these multiple angles to new levels, backing their theories with developments in science and evolutionary biology—Wilson in arguing for the possibility of gossip occurring as a group-level adaptation, which may also benefit the individual, and Dunbar proposing a theory for the evolution of larger social groups being made possible through the ability for humans to use informal communication strategies such as gossip.

Following the establishment of gossip as a subject worthy of study within academia came the establishment of gossip as a communicative genre. Jörg Bergmann, with his 1987 book *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*, outlines the reasoning and justification for gossip to be considered a communicative genre, and not simply to be categorized as a “tag-along” to other communicative genres. Before Bergmann, a philosopher of language, Herbert Paul Grice, published “Logic and Conversation” in 1975, which laid the foundation for conversational analysis and genres of communication in general. Furthermore, in 1981, a psychologist named Albert Mehrabian published his work discussing the distinction and importance of non-verbal communication, which has important implications when one is looking to understand and organize conversations and communication styles. Together the works of Grice, Mehrabian and Bergmann lay the foundation for understanding the communicative structure of gossip as an informal means of communicating evaluative information about others.

While the functionalism approach to studying gossip began with Gluckman, it has persisted throughout the last five decades. Though, research methods have changed quite substantially. Attempts towards quantitative research have come to light in the last ten years with computer simulations and "games" organized to observe cooperation (Sommerfeld et al. 2007), learning (Rendell, 2010) and communication strategies. Qualitative studies and ethnographies continue to play a significant role in research on

gossip, as well. For example, Sally Engle Merry recounts her study of gossip in a major Eastern city in her ethnographic article, “Rethinking gossip and scandal.” Nichole Hess and Edward Hagen have researched female coalitions in professional environments, which they have presented at multiple conferences worldwide. Deborah Tannen has covered a wide range of linguistics topics, including how men and women communicate differently, and the importance of rapport-talk, especially between women, in her book *You just don’t understand! Men and Women in Conversation*. Researchers such as John Laver, Karen Tracy, Justine Coupland, Nikolas Coupland, and Julie Naughton have looked at phatic communion, small talk and the social implication of such informal means of communication.

Within this on-going conversation, a new development has arisen: observing group interactions on the Internet and within social networking sites. Dunbar has maintained his claim that one’s social group continues to remain limited to 150 individuals, while others, such as Robert Putnam (2001) and Vincent Miller (2008), have expressed concern that social groups and social interactions as we know them are changing in online social environments. Various news reports of the role of Facebook and informal communication worldwide indicate that social groups are augmenting through the mediation of online social networking such that thousands of youth with common expectations of norms and values are coming together for various causes.

Research conducted on social networking sites has focused in large part on ethics and privacy concerns (Bowe, 2010; Ess, 2010). Alternatively, the research has looked at the social aspects and social implications of online social interactions (Ellison et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2008; Putnam, 2001; Tufekci, 2008; Walther et al., 2008). Gossip on social networking sites has yet to be investigated in terms of whether or not gossip is still characterized in the same ways as face-to-face interactions, and if gossip still serves the same rhetorical

functions. Given that norms and values in face-to-face interactions are enforced most effectively when groups are tightly knit and in close communication, how are norms and values being expressed and policed in online settings? Is it even possible? Are we losing something when we lose face-to-face interaction? Are the traditional rhetorical functions of gossip still effective?

It has been my experience in researching this thesis that an eclectic approach to studying gossip has best served to help understand and investigate my research question. The various schools of thought have come together through this interdisciplinary investigation into the roles of gossip online.

Varying Views of Gossip

In 2004, the *Review of General Psychology* published a special issue focusing specifically on gossip. Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University, contributed with his article "Postscript to the special issue on gossip." He made several claims from a skeptic's point of view in regards to the functionality of gossip. For example:

"It is tempting to ask about the origins and functions of gossip, but this temptation should be resisted. From a psychological perspective, gossip is likely to be an arbitrary and unnatural category." (Bloom, 2004)

Bloom is not the only one to dispute the claim that gossip serves a beneficial purpose for social groups. Many would advocate for communicating directly with others as opposed to talking about third parties "behind their back," as the saying goes. Many religious doctrines dismiss or discourage gossip on moral grounds, following the stereotypes of gossip being destructive and scandalous. Children grow up hearing maxims such as: *If you don't*

have anything nice to say, don't say it at all. Merry offers a critique to the general discussion of gossip within academic discourse, in that many of the studies and theories proposed in regards to gossip tend to highlight all the "harmonious consequences" while disregarding the negative implications (Merry, 1997).

While I believe that gossip can be hurtful and destructive, even spiteful and insensitive as its reputation supports, it has significance on both side of the moral spectrum. Gossip can have a tendency to undermine authority or formal hierarchies; therefore, in situations such as the workplace, government or military, gossip may do more harm than good (unless those structures were inherently unhealthy or destructive to the public good, in which case gossip plays a different role and a different context comes into play).

I do *not* believe that arguing for the effectiveness of gossip in informal situations and validating some of the criticisms of gossip need to be mutually exclusive. In fact, I believe that a richer understanding of gossip and its uses (both good and bad) would lead to a more effective use of informal communication and allow for healthier inter-group (as well as intra-group) relations. As we will see later on, communicating through these informal channels comes to be expected by peers, family and friends, and thus adopts for itself a degree of virtue, so long as it is used within reason.

Many would pose the question of whether or not there are more constructive ways for groups to ensure adherence to values. Why not encourage direct and frank face-to-face interactions? These questions assume an ideal of transparency and directness, which may in itself violate certain norms in certain situations, such as the counter-ideal of privacy and discretion, which is equally prominent. Additionally, it may be necessary to acknowledge some human limitations. Feelings of embarrassment, intimidation, fear and awkwardness are not to be taken lightly. People carry a lot of baggage in their lives (family, income,

happiness, etc.) and all of these may be put on the line when one confronts another person, especially over a negative issue. For example, surely many Tunisians disapproved of former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia, and yet many may not feel that risking their own lives or their family's livelihood would be worth a direct confrontation or outright protest. Facebook and gossip provided safer outlets for these voices.

Here is another example: I once worked with a research and publishing company that traveled to different organizations, teaching techniques to help implement difficult changes within those organizations. One of the exercises during the training was to have the employees suggest ways in which their executive leaders might help in facilitating the change. In other words, in what ways is my boss not living up to his or her role as leader? Needless to say, everyone in the room became very uneasy when faced with the prospect of offering "constructive criticism" (which felt a lot like gossip) about their boss. *Will this be shown to anyone? Will my boss know it was me who wrote this? Is my job at risk?* The reality of the power dynamics within the workplace resulted in unequal and competing relationships between both co-workers and their executive leaders. Even for the sake of one exercise, these participants were hesitant to share evaluative information about their boss that may be exposed publically, let alone confront their bosses directly. This is not to imply that the participants were somehow "weak" individuals who could not stand up for themselves; rather, it is impractical and inconsiderate to advocate for direct interactions, understanding that most people will not knowingly and willingly put themselves in front of a firing squad (even if offering constructive criticism to their executives would be beneficial to them in the long run). And yet, I regularly overheard these same people engaging in more clandestine gossip on the same subject matter during coffee breaks. It just wasn't being formally communicated on paper.

Having the chance to gossip around the coffeepot or water-cooler is not simply for the sake of one person complaining to another about their woes. Such conversations allow for everyone to take part in assessing violations of norms and values as established by the group, thereby allowing the group to maintain its solidarity, even within a hierarchical structure. In the case of the employees evaluating their executives off the record, we can see how they are employed within a hierarchical system, but as individuals, they utilize gossip to exercise their own autonomy. They have expectations for their work place and violations of those expectations is cause for gossip. In some cases, if the violation is unclear, gossiping about the occurrences with others allows for everyone to understand the issue more clearly. Similar to the rule of law, the norms and values of a group require interpretation. In informal group structures, such as friendship groups or cooperative groups, gossip is often times the most effective way to understand, interpret and enforce the group's norms and values. In this case, gossip becomes an effective tool.

It is possible to see too how social networking sites (SNS), email and online chatting can complicate this issue of evaluating and reporting on behavior of individuals within a hierarchy, or just other individuals in general. Charles Ess, a Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Drury University, describes in his book, *Digital Media Ethics*, a wide range of issues involving the Internet and other forms of digital interactions. Ess captures the essence of contemporary Internet use when he states that most people feel the information transferred in online communications is private. And yet, we have all heard horror stories of people either not getting hired, or getting fired, due to the content left on their Facebook page, or a misaddressed email. In later chapters we will discuss some of the newly introduced (since the rise of the Internet and online social sites) issues with public and private information on the Internet. For now, I just want to acknowledge that gossip

between colleagues in an online environment is one example of how the Internet and Facebook are changing how people gossip and what they gossip about.

Michelson and Mouly (2004), in their paper, "Do loose lips sink ships? The meaning, antecedents and consequences of rumour and gossip in organisations," describe how aspects of informal communications, such as gossip, may "run counter to the official channels." In other words, gossip can be seen as something that may undermine the values or norms prescribed by an authoritarian institution, such as religious organizations, workplace hierarchies, tyrannical governments, etc., especially if these norms and values are not in line with the individual's norms and values, in a way similar to what Goffman (1961) refers to as the "underlife." The underlife has been defined by poet January Gill O'Neil as: "Those emotional truths that reside beneath the respectable patina of our public lives," but may be more commonly understood as referring to the actions people take to alter their identities away from the identities prescribed to them by formal institutions or organizations. Understood within this context, gossip offers a means by which individuals can express themselves outside of their institutionalized roles.

Regardless of whether gossip is accepted or rejected by these institutions, it remains that the prohibition of gossip acknowledges that gossip affects norms and values and that is why it must be controlled. Prohibitions in themselves are manifestations of authority attempting to regulate the norms and values of a group, and this same authority will condemn anything that appears as a threat. Authority may see gossip as something that undermines the hierarchy within which the authority occupies the top rungs of the ladder, but the response to the perceived threat of gossip also serves to amplify the importance and role of gossip.

This dichotomy between institutionalized norms and values and the "underlife" is not a cultural universal, however. For example, in a study of linguistic ideologies and

leaders among the Warao people of northeastern South America, anthropologist Charles Briggs describes how the Warao put much emphasis on discourse, and how various discourse rituals such as woman's wailings, shamanistic songs and gossip, "constitute powerful forms of social action" (Briggs, 1992). Gossip, Briggs argues, is a way of keeping powerful individuals and leaders in check by publically disclosing criticism about them, and as such, gossip can be seen as a way of "naturalizing social inequality and social power." Gossip is accessible to everyone, and is thus a means of establishing equality and of preventing certain individuals from gaining too much power. In undermining the hierarchies or potential tyranny of individuals with too much power, gossip can be seen as a means of social control and maintainer of balance, which is accepted within the society. While not constituting as underlife behaviors per se, we can nevertheless see how gossip achieves similar ends in both American and Warao cultural constructs as a means of informally raising awareness and maintaining social control.

Studying Gossip

Methodologically, gossip can be a very slippery aspect of culture to study. As Wilson et al. (2000) state in their article, "Gossip and other aspects of language as group-level adaptations," gossip is usually restricted to close relations and ceases when others (outsiders) are present (see also Bergmann, 1987: 5). As such, a researcher attempting to study gossip is left to mitigate a difficult situation. For example, if the researcher succeeds in entering the gossip community (an indicator for some anthropologists of success), then he or she may also feel bound by trust and other norms that accompany being admitted to the group. Disclosing information to unrelated parties, (say, by publishing the content in a book), would violate those norms. Thus, there arises an interesting tangle in which the

researcher cannot study gossip without being privy to it, but once privy, the researchers would have difficulties sharing the information. Sally Engle Merry (1997) also makes the point that the audience affects the content of gossip. Certain details may be withheld in the presence of certain individuals, especially strangers. (See Chapter 4 for gossip characteristics pertaining to discretion, exclusion, and privacy.) Researchers, falling into this latter category, tend to be excluded from the juicier gossip. Merry describes how the gossip she overheard during her fieldwork in an urban U.S. community was either in passing, or gossip that had to do with someone who was more socially removed than she as a researcher, neither of which provided her access to the more effectual gossip.

Another issue faced by gossip researchers is a common one faced by many researchers studying social sciences. Changes in behavior of the subject being studied alter the results simply from the increased attention on the subject. This “reactivity” is otherwise known as the Hawthorne Effect, named for a set of experiments in the early 1900s at a Chicago factory owned by Western Electric called the Hawthorne Works, in which they found a shift in behavior in the factory workers simply because they were the subject of a study (Adair, 1984), which in turn nullified the study results. A similar problem occurs when studying gossip.

In an online environment, I have found that studying gossip is also difficult, but for different reasons. On the one hand, the evaluative information is made less private, especially on sites such as Facebook. Becoming privy to the comings and goings of others is less a matter of being well connected through the grapevine, and more a matter of having the time or the motivation to “stalk”² other people on Facebook.

² The term “Facebook stalking” is a colloquial term used to describe looking at the Facebook profile of someone with whom one is only marginally connected with the aim of learning more about that person in a non-malicious way. For example, it would not be considering stalking if you regularly checked your best friend’s Facebook page, but it may be considered Facebook stalking if you found the profile of the nice or attractive person whom

Additionally, as will be mentioned later in the discussion of privacy and how the privacy related characteristics of gossip have changed online, I have found that communications on Facebook have become more scripted as they become more public. I find that post-ers are more concerned for their online reputations, which become more vulnerable in some ways online in the absence of privacy and non-verbal communication. As a result, most evaluative comments left on Facebook are positive as a form of reputation management for the commenter. Thus, any gossiping that may occur will likely be either heavily cloaked in sarcasm, buried within an inside joke, or through strategic friending, de-friending, tagging or de-tagging (all of which may require being involved with the group to understand). Therefore, any online conversation, let alone gossip, becomes more difficult to interpret. The result of this careful planning, from a researcher's point of view, is that gossip becomes difficult to recognize. Every status update, every post left on another person's wall, every comment, every photo tagged³ can be seen as resembling gossip—either directly, or through implications—but recognizing or understanding the gossip can be difficult if one is not involved with the group sharing the gossip.

In my examination of gossip on Facebook, I have found that interpreting gossip online becomes more difficult for other reasons, as well. For example, the context of the event is rarely defined. Pictures of a night out, or a comment, such as “I’m sorry about last weekend,” are removed from their context, and are therefore much more difficult to interpret, not unlike archaeological artifacts in a museum that have been removed from

you met in the library. Walther et al (2008) found, in regards to gaining information and impressions of new acquaintances, that Facebook users look up new friends on Facebook soon after their first meeting, in search of common friends, interests, or just to learn more about the person.

³ Not only can photographs be uploaded onto Facebook, people can be identified within the pictures through what is known as “tagging.” One can be tagged or de-tagged as means of communicating friendship or connection, or as an adaptation of gossip—for example, if someone was intoxicated one night, posting a picture of them and tagging their picture is a form of communicating evaluative information through an informal communication channel (in this case, a visual channel.) Comments can also be left underneath posted pictures, which can contribute to the evaluation of the photo's content.

their original site locations. Utilizing forensic and deliberative rhetoric (see Chapter 6) becomes more difficult as, in regards to comments and posts, there is a time lapse between the epideictic statement, and the follow-up inquiries, if they ever occur. In many ways, Facebook supplements or complements face-to-face conversations through comments, posts and chats, but also through more indirect means, such as a party invitation sent on Facebook. For example, one person may exchange comments or chat with her friend in the evening about something that happened during the day. The following day, they may pick up their conversation, not from where they left off in their face-to-face conversation, but from where they left off commenting or chatting in the evening. If both conversations, face-to-face and the online, were to be heard or read independently of each other, they would appear to be only fragments of a conversation, but when taken together, they comprise of a whole conversation that took place through different means. Thus, in researching gossip online, I find that many conversations are merely fragments, removed from their larger conversational context.

Finally, gossip is difficult to study due to the lack of common consensus among researchers about various aspects of gossip, from the definition to the purpose. Throughout this discussion, there will arise multiple dichotomies that attempt to drive researchers to take one side or another, whether the issue is asking if gossip is equivalent to rumor, if gossip is effective as a means of passive aggressive self-advancement, or if gossip is a useful tool for informal group management. Ultimately, I feel that these types of divisions do little to further any understanding of the material. This paper, therefore, will serve to tie many of these dichotomies together and demonstrate that various conclusions about the usages of gossip and language need not be mutually exclusive.

For example, gossip can be classified in two distinct camps: self-serving and group serving, and the debate about the more likely service has been lingering since Max

Gluckman first introduced the idea about group-benefitting gossip in 1963. The general premise of the spilt camps assumes that gossip, evolutionarily speaking, has been an adaptation that has occurred largely on a group level, and not solely on an individual level (Gluckman, 1963; Wilson et al, 2000; Wilson and Kniffin, 2005). Alternatively, researchers, such as Robert Paine (1967) in his refutation of Gluckman's claim, have argued that gossip is purely self-serving, an adaptation to "protect individual interests." (See Paine, 1967; McAndrew et al., 2007; McAndrew and Milenkovic, 2002.) While the two types are distinct, they need not be exclusive.

While many of the negative connotations surrounding gossip stem from the self-serving gossip hypothesis, this is not to imply that self-serving gossip is necessarily unethical or immoral. Rather it is helpful to consider this hypothesis of self-serving gossip as identifying one set of motivators for individuals when they are interacting socially. For example, McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) demonstrated with their study that individuals were most interested in gossip about people who would affect them directly, as either providers of resources, or competitors for potential romantic partners⁴. Thus, within this framework, gossip can be seen as self-serving, because people are interested in those who can provide desirable services or resources to them as individuals. On the other hand, this same data could support a group-serving hypothesis, as it may be beneficial to be interested

⁴ The McAndrew and Milenkovic (2002) study consisted of two parts. First, researchers asked study participants to rank twelve celebrity articles based on how likely the participant was to read the article. The results showed that participants were more interested in articles about celebrities who were of the same gender and of similar age as the participant. The second stage of the research involved study participants reading positive and negative news, and then ranking the order of which news they would be interested in, or likely to pass on, depending on whether the news was about someone close to them (e.g. relatives, significant others, close friends), a lesser acquaintance (e.g. a professor), or a complete stranger. The results of the second stage showed that participants were more interested in spreading negative news about "adversaries" (e.g. strangers or "powerful others"), while "protecting" negative news about their close friends or relatives. Meanwhile, positive information about close friends or relatives was shared willingly, while positive news about adversaries was more guarded.

in one's group members as a means of maintaining group cohesion, and keeping up with alliances and conflicts.

Group-serving gossip, as demonstrated by Wilson et al. (2000)⁵, is received more favorably by others, and is by definition more useful to the group as a whole, even if it may be detrimental to the individual. Gossiping for the benefit of the group becomes itself an established norm that comes to be expected in many cases, such as neighborhood watches or political campaigns. Alternatively, others (such as Paine, 1967) have made the claim that even if the gossip benefits the group, it is still driven by self-serving motivators. I say, *Why not both?*

⁵ Wilson et al. (2000) conducted a "paper and pencil test" in which they composed fictional gossip scenarios and asked students to rate their approval of the target, the speaker and the listener of the gossip. Their results showed that self-serving gossip was inappropriate, while group serving gossip was not only appropriate, it was expected.

CHAPTER 2

Discussion Framework

This paper will be operating within expanding and overlapping frameworks. The first framework encompasses the well-studied argument that gossip serves as a cohesive, instructive, policing and/or reputation controlling device both for the group and the individual, who wittingly or unwitting utilize gossip in these ways. Gossip is most effective as a social tool when the group in which gossip is circulating is a close-knit, tightly bonded group who abides by a shared value system (Merry, 1997). We may see these types of group attributes with peer groups, friendship circles, workplace colleagues, families, etc. Within this framework, it should be noted that there will always be individuals who are intentionally or unintentionally immune to gossip and its effects. Sally Engle Merry, Professor at New York University and author of the article, “Rethinking Gossip and Scandal” (1997), describes how there are instances in which individuals who are very wealthy, very powerful or very poor often fall into this category—the wealthy and powerful because they are not dependent on any particular group necessarily, and the poor because they may not have the means to abide by certain norms or values.

This thesis is not intended to capture the entire essence of gossip or all of its “communicative goals,” but rather to examine the idea that gossip, as a “communicative action” (Tracy, 1991), impacts social norms and values, specifically in the social media environment. Similarly, in this analysis of gossip I acknowledge that any analysis of discourse can neither account for every conversational goal, nor can these goals be identified or connected as clearly as they may appear (Tracy, 1991). In attempting an understanding of gossip as a communicative action, and as fuel for discourse, I mean to

narrow the scope of study so as to apply it in other contexts. Specifically, the ideas about gossip will be extended to new territory—online social networking sites (SNS). By applying the traditional understandings of gossip to an online framework, I will argue that gossip has adapted to serve some similar and some different roles online.

Social networking sites are largely characterized by widespread, less homogenous, loosely bonded groups of individuals. And yet, Facebook is being used more and more as a unifying and organizational tool for group cohesion—everything from weekend gatherings to social movements. Can SNS be weakening individual relationships and building up group cohesion at the same time? Is gossip an important communicative tool in this process?

Some researchers have described a trend in which informal social controls are less effective, or less utilized as societies become more complex. Under these circumstances, formal controls (laws) grow in influence (Black, 1976: 108). The trend that this author in particular was noticing may have been that as people congregate in larger groups (e.g. New York City), they tend to know each other less well and the community members are neither tied together as they may be in a small town or village, nor are they as reliant upon each other for survival or aid. Within bonded groups, informal controls, such as gossip, operate well, whereas between strangers, informal controls, such as gossip, are virtually ineffective.

So while gossip plays a role as an informal control for maintaining social norms and increasing group cohesion in smaller, closely bonded groups (as I will present in more detail later in this paper), it is less effective as an informal control strategy in large, loosely formed groups; that is, until we enter the world of social media. This paper will examine how and why gossip plays a role as an informal control strategy, in addition to facilitating social cohesion, in this unfolding mode of online communication, and how new informal

social controls may grow in strength with the introduction of new technologies and the associated social complexity.

Throughout this thesis, I intend to organize my arguments by first discussing the traditional ways in which gossip serves to maintain a group's norms and values or perform other rhetorical functions, and then apply this information to an online context while discussing ways in which the traditional roles of gossip may or may not have the same effects in the social media environment.

Defining Gossip

Gossip, a highly stigmatized aspect of everyday language, has been characterized as an aimless, destructive pastime, recalling the three maids “agossiping” over tea. Movies, books, sitcoms and tabloids such as *Mean Girls*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Jersey Shore* and *People* magazine have done little to put gossip in a positive light. On the contrary, these popular culture constructs are so effective at relegating gossip to the domain of the futile and trivial, that even mentioning gossip in the context of legitimate research is met with raised eyebrows.

In the face of such skepticism, a good place to start might be a definition. What is gossip? The origin of the word gossip, rooted in the Old English word *godsib*, meaning “god parent,” has evolved quite dramatically over the centuries. While referring to a close friend until the 1400s, then anyone who engaged in idle talk over the subsequent 100 years, it eventually made the jump from a noun to a verb and began referring to trifling talk about others around the 16th century. The definition of gossip used in this paper is “the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about third parties” (Foster, 2004). This final working definition of gossip was developed by

Erik Foster, a psychologist with the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University, who, after compiling a thorough taxonomy of gossip research, summarized the most generally agreed upon definition. Within this definition, drawing in part on previous research, I have synthesized eight characteristics of gossip, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, that define gossip as: 1) social in nature, 2) about past events, 3) about third parties, who are not present, 4) evaluative, 5) informal, 6) exclusive, 7) a means of interpreting norms and values, and 8) private.

In an online environment, however, the characteristics of gossip are altered. There is a shift in the third, sixth and eighth characteristics as a result of a decrease in privacy (or uncertainty of privacy) online. While these will be examined more closely in the section on “Characteristics of Gossip,” one must be aware that the characteristics of gossip are largely context dependent, and any attempt at examining gossip in a new context such as social media will require some modification of the characteristics of gossip to clarify the thesis and provide a platform for the discussion.

Furthermore, for the purpose of this discussion, gossip as a communicative element differs from the neighboring concepts “small talk,” “rumor” and “scandal.” A later section will elaborate on how gossip is composed in part of small talk (as a form of phatic communion), but these two concepts are distinct in that small talk serves almost exclusively group bonding functions (Coupland et al., 1992), while gossip can contribute to group cohesion and solidarity, but is not limited to this purpose. In a similar way, I distinguish between gossip and rumor by allowing that rumors are generally not based in actual past events and the intent of rumors are often malicious in nature. While gossip *can* be rumor, it is not necessarily rumor. Gossip generally consists of recounts of past events that are based in truth (Michelson and Mouly, 2004) and the purpose of gossip is not necessarily malicious in nature. It should be noted that gossip often includes elaborations

on the truth as it moves from person to person, and malicious intent may be present in some cases, but within the working definition for this thesis, I am acknowledging these aspects as atypical.

Finally, gossip differs from scandal in that “scandal occurs when gossip is elevated into the public arena” (Merry, 1997). We will discuss later how the issue of "public" versus "private" information becomes problematic in online social environments, as the control over privacy is less certain. Such shifts provide yet another dimension to the expanding framework of cyber-gossip. I am holding, for the sake of this thesis, that gossip elevated to the public arena on Facebook is not necessarily scandal, as the distinction between public and private on Facebook requires different frameworks.

Relevance of this Study

Informal communication affects interpersonal understanding across a range of scenarios, such as everyday group interactions, work place cohesiveness, personal relationships and community involvement. Informal communication channels facilitated through the Internet, such as email, chat rooms, blogs and SNS such as Facebook, are having increasingly profound impacts on social movements worldwide, for better or for worse. The effectiveness of these various communication styles and the roles of rhetoric in everyday discourse have major implications not only on our intimate social groups, but on the global community as a whole, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis. An understanding of those styles and roles are therefore increasingly important.

Evaluative informal communication practices have even more specific influences in social life beyond the realm of national revolts and revolutions, such as the ways in which friends gossip, parents teach children, managers motivate their people and politicians earn

your trust and your vote. Not knowing how to communicate or interact properly in certain situations, or within a certain group of people, can greatly hinder the degree to which one may succeed in a social environment⁶.

Gossip in and of itself is not only important as a genre of communication, but it has practical relevance in various other social arenas as well. The following sections of this paper will discuss those rhetorical modes in more depth and explore the means and the reasons why gossip continues to play a role in society. We must not only be able to understand gossip as a means of communication (thus allowing people to recognize gossip and react appropriately in gossip interactions) but we must also understand how the nature of gossip helps people to understand the ever-changing norms, values and beliefs in their society.

By defining the origin and establishing the resting place of gossip amongst the multitude of valid communication genres and social scenarios, we identify gossip as having a platform from which it can be defended as a legitimate subject, worthy of study and examination. Gossip as an adaptation affecting various aspects of social life is worth looking at in greater detail, as it provides insights into the evolution of human sociality, communication and language (not to mention the fact that we all do it at one time or another).

Furthermore, familiarity with these degrees of understanding is important when we begin to discuss how gossip has changed in the last several years since the rise of Facebook and its ever-increasing user base. While much research has been presented in terms of defining the usefulness of gossip in society, much less research has been done on the effects

⁶ I have identified social success as a somewhat problematic term, as it is almost entirely a subjective concept. One man's social failure could be another's social success. Social success could in part be measured by social capital (Putnam, 2001), but not always, such as in cases of the very wealthy, the very powerful, or the very poor, who may be immune to such measures (I acknowledge that these same groups were identified as being immune to gossip. This is not a coincidence.) For the sake of this argument, I am relying on the idea that social success is a function of social capital.

that the Internet and online SNS are having on gossip. New methods of building friendship and trust will emerge, new ways of teaching one another about group norms and values will manifest, and the ways in which we express our discontent with someone's actions will change as people use the new "targeted and flexible tools" (Unze, 2010) made available online. Increasingly, face-to-face communication, or even voice-to-voice communication, is no longer the sole means of getting across a message, for better or for worse, and we will be examining that phenomenon more closely in the pages to come.

Summary

In the first chapter of this thesis, I reviewed previous literature in addition to discussing the varying views of gossip and some of the difficulties in studying gossip. In Chapter 2, I outlined the discussion framework for this thesis as a whole, in addition to defining my working definition of gossip and the relevance of this study.

The amount of research on gossip has expanded greatly over the past ten years as attempts are made to wrestle with the meaning behind gossip. But gossip is like water; it slips through one's fingers right when you think you have its meaning cupped nicely in your palms. In the pages to come, I will attempt to make a vessel for gossip, so that I might in turn understand its uses. The bottom line is that there is no one single way in which gossip operates within society, but rather it takes on multiple roles. When taken together, these different ways of understanding gossip lead to a better understanding of informal, evaluative communication strategies in all of their intricacies. When this understanding is applied to online communications, we can begin to examine the implications of gossip in the new world of social media.

PART I: Gossip as Communicative Genre

Introduction to Part I

Part I will be composed of three chapters that cohesively serve to define gossip as an independent genre of communication and provide a platform for the study of gossip in both online and offline, face-to-face situations:

- Gossip as a communicative genre (Chapter 3)
- Characteristics of gossip (Chapter 4)
- Gossiping in groups (Chapter 5)

In Chapter 3, I will be describing how communicative genres are defined based on principles of conversational cooperation, as well as by unique genre characteristics. This chapter will be building on the foundation of three primary linguists, Jörg Bergman, H.P. Grice, and Albert Mehrabian.

Following, in Chapter 4 I will be outlining the eight characteristics of gossip which contribute to gossip being defined as a communicative genre: 1) Gossip is social, 2) Gossip is about past events, 3) Gossip is about third parties, 4) Gossip is evaluative, 5) Gossip is an informal means of communicating, 6) Gossip is exclusive of non-group members, 7) Gossip helps to interpret norms and values, and 8) Gossip is private.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the nature of human groups as we understand them today. In order to understand how gossip classifies as a communicative genre, and how gossip serves rhetorical functions within groups, benefiting both the individual and the group as a whole, it is necessary to first understand the framework of groups. This fifth chapter will provide a platform from which we can better understand how gossip serves various social purposes.

CHAPTER 3

Breaking Down Gossip

Bloom (2004) from the postscript of *Review of General Psychology*, with his previously described beliefs about gossip, addresses a point that I wish to question: That gossip is an arbitrary and unnatural category.

In regards to this claim, Bloom interprets gossip as a *convening* of evolutionary traits that are intended for other purposes. According to Bloom, “gossip emerges because (a) language evolved and (b) we find other people worth talking about” (Bloom, 2004). He acknowledges that once taken in effect, gossip can be a very useful tool, though evolutionary forces did not drive gossip as its own adaptation (hence, the argument that gossip is "unnatural"). I concur that arguing for the evolutionary origins of gossip is tricky. From an anthropological perspective, something that occurs so prevalently over time and across various cultures (such as gossip) is considered conceivably to have an evolutionary basis. However, such a theory would require a genetic basis to gossip to be strongly supported. In the absence of a known gossip gene, an alternative explanation may be in order.

Meet Jörg Bergman

Bloom’s claim refers to "the arbitrary categorization" of gossip, which has been addressed by other experts, in particular Jörg Bergmann, a professor of sociology at the Justus-Liebig-University in Giesen, Germany who specializes in conversational analysis, specifically moral communication in everyday life.

Bergmann, in his book, *Discreet Indiscretions: The social organization of gossip*, argues that “communicative genres” must be composed of various aspects of a conversation such as context, content, tone, body language, audience, evaluative valence of the content, etc., which are readily recognized as being of a specific genre of communication (Bergmann, 1987: 27). Saussure described a similar relationship where “the individual’s receptive and co-ordinating faculties build up a stock of imprints which turn out to be for all practical purposes the same as the next person’s” (Saussure, 1916). Such indicators direct the actions of the participants in the interaction, which ultimately leads to a cohesive experience for everyone involved.

One does not normally think of a conversation as requiring cooperation, but upon imagining a situation in which the person with whom one was talking does not follow the commonly agreed upon rules and guidelines of traditional conversation, one may see that the conversation falls apart. For example, a friend of mine organizes a book club every week with some of her close friends. At a recent meeting, one of the book clubbers invited another woman to attend the weekly gathering. Throughout the entire meeting this invited woman talked incessantly, such that no one else could get a word in edge-wise. Furthermore, the woman did not stay on topic, starting out with her opinion of the book, and then digressing to a monologue about her personal life. This woman was not cooperating in the conversation; in fact, a dialogue could not even exist because the rules of conversation were not followed.

As with this example, gossip must also follow certain guidelines. We will see throughout this chapter how, in contrast to Bloom’s claim that gossip is simply an “arbitrary” category, that gossip has its own unique, communicative genre.

Gossip as a Communicative Genre

An understanding of language and conversation is crucial to understanding the fundamental characteristics of gossip. Furthermore, it is important to understand the intricacies within language to understand the various ways in which gossip is conveyed in a communication exchange. For example, gossip can be transferred more subtly through a form of “implicature,” or more straightforwardly through a direct approach. The following discussion will outline the communicative genre of gossip as it occurs within a conversation, in addition to dealing with the intricacies and artfulness that can be incorporated into gossip conversations.

Bergmann describes how communication genres require a somewhat systematic description, similar to taxonomic descriptions of plants or animals, but different in that conversations are fluid and the speakers and listeners actively participate in determining what kind of conversations are taking place (Bergmann, 1987: 27-28). He emphasizes that these characteristics are in some ways binding, in that once a genre of communication is defined in a conversation, using characteristics not native to the original genre often causes confusion. This is comparable to the synchrony of dancing and drumming in traditional dances from Ghana. The dancers determine the rhythm of the dance with their bodies, their voices and their steps, while the drummers must learn to play to the movement of the dancers. If either the dancers or the drummers suddenly decide to change their rhythm, or cannot maintain the rhythm, then the synchrony is lost.

Because conversations are of such an ephemeral nature, it is difficult to perceive them as having rigid rules. Therefore, it is more sensible to view the characteristics of communicative genres as being composed of *guidelines* that differentiate one genre of communication from another. Guidelines can refer to the style of speaking, the themes of the content, communicative modality, varying situational circumstances, etc., but there is

no such thing as an 'ideal' conversation representing each genre (Bergmann, 1987: 28); there is no canon of perfect conversations. There are simply patterns that, when followed, lead participants down a relatively contained conversational path.

Others have come to similar conclusions in regards to language and conversation. H.P. Grice, an English philosopher of language and professor at Oxford and later UC Berkley, acknowledges that while the language of science and logic is useful and important, "natural language" also must be considered as a valuable and effective means of communication, and as such has different governing rules.

Grice (1975) provides some basic tools for analyzing a conversation by first giving theoretical guidelines for what constitutes a traditional, "conventional" conversation⁷.

1. The first characteristic of conversation refers to the **quantity** of information being shared. Specifically, that which participants are sharing is neither more nor less than what is required.
2. The next characteristic specifies the **quality** of the information being shared, in that it should neither be false, nor any more than what is known to be truthful.
3. Third, conversations are defined by **relevance**; namely, one must stick to information that is relevant to the conversation at hand.
4. The final characteristic refers to the **manner** in which something is conveyed, which, unlike the others, does not refer to the content of the information, but rather to how it is presented.

One who follows these general guidelines in conversation is said to be following what Grice has coined the "Cooperation Principle," which serves as the scaffolding to understanding conversations. For example, making claims such as *say*

⁷ It should be noted once again that while these guidelines are useful for analyzing conversation, there exists no such ideal mode of talking or communicating. Coupland et al., in their paper, "How are you?: Negotiating phatic communion," acknowledge that "even our most instrumental, transactional encounters are pervasively organized around *multiple* interactional goals that go well beyond the transmission and reception of factual information" (1992). Meaning, that each conversation is composed of multiple different set of guidelines that intersect and overlap like concentric circles. For this discussion, the concept of just one set of guidelines for one conversation is over simplified.

neither more or less than what is required is a highly ambiguous statement, as defining what is “required” would be impossible. And yet, as one who participates in conversations, it is somehow always clear when one person is speaking too much (such as the woman at the book club), or not enough (such as the British Petroleum president after the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico).

When we begin looking at these four characteristics in an online environment, we can see how the first three—quantity, quality and relevance—remain, though our expectations about each one may be dependent on the context. For example, Facebook offers multiple means of having a conversation, or rather, communicating, with other individuals with varying degrees of privacy: “messages,” “wall posts,” “comments,” “status updates,” and “chats.” I will briefly examine each of these modes of communication:

Message: The “message” tool works similarly to email, though one may only send messages to one’s Facebook “friends” and not to an email address. These messages range widely in length (between 4-8 lines for shorter messages, up to 30-50 lines for longer messages,) and can only be viewed by the sender and the recipient. The quality of the information is generally more personal in nature, and less self-inflating than wall posts, comments or status updates. Messages can also be sent by group administrators, who advertise to the group members through these email messages, such as activity announcements, or informational updates.

Wall post: “Wall posts” are notes left on friends’ profile Walls. These messages are visible to anyone who is friends with the profile owner, or anyone within the profile

owner's network depending on how strict the profile owner has set their privacy settings. Researchers have found that Wall posts are quite impactful in terms of affecting the profile owner's reputation (Walther et al., 2008). As such, one would expect (and research supports) that Walls posts are rarely blatantly negative, and are prone to give more realistic impressions of the Wall owner (Walther et al., 2008). People have described leaving messages on other friends' Walls in terms of giving a sort of "gift," or demonstrating to the profile owner their importance (we will discuss later how gossip is thought to do the same (Tannen, 2007)). In terms of length, Walls posts are generally short, no more than three to four lines long and consist of varying content, such as social call outs ("Hey man, how's life?!"), as a medium for sharing inside jokes (alienating a reader who not "in" on the joke can demonstrate who are one's close friends) and as a means of showing affection. Bowe (2010) describes how when couples displays public affection on Facebook, they are "creating a script" where they perform as a couple who are in a successful relationship. This same point could be made for non-romantic relationships. Many users (in particular female users) will leave notes such as "I love you," "I miss you," or "XOXO" on each other's Walls. Bowe (2010) describes how receiving these types of Walls posts make people feel good, and therefore feel motivated to "share the love." Wall posts also serve to facilitate making plans. The fact that the plan making is done in the public realm speaks to the general idea of active impression management, which suggests that publically discussing plans indicates that you are someone *with* plans, someone who is busy, sought out for their company, popular, etc.

Comments: "Comments" are short messages that are left in response to a status update, a Wall post, a video, a photograph or another comment. Comments can be

short like Wall posts, but are almost always relevant to the corresponding post, video, photograph, or comment. These comments are usually of an evaluative quality, but are rarely negative. A shorter version of a comment is what is known as the “Like” button, which allows a friend to “like” the content of the status update, Wall post, video, photograph and even the comment itself without having to actually write a message displaying approval. A thumbs-up icon appears next to the comment or picture that is “liked.” Following the absence of negative comments, there is not a “Dislike” button, despite a Facebook group with over 122,000 members advocating for one. Comments are some of the most public means of communicating on Facebook, as comments may appear on the “Newsfeed,” which appears on the homepage of everyone within the commenter’s network, especially if the comment is left in response to a “status update.”

Status Update: A “Status update” operates similarly to a Twitter post, in that profile owners can post their current status on their profile page. This type of comment is not restricted by relevance or quality, as the content revealed is left solely to the discretion of the profile owner. The text field itself is labeled, “What’s on your mind?” The quantity, however, rarely exceeds more than one or two lines of text. Status updates are one of the most public forms of information sharing on Facebook, as all status updates are displayed in the “Newsfeed.” Status updates are one of the many forms in which individuals can attempt to manage their online personas by broadcasting to their network how they are feeling or what they are doing. This information is usually thought out and deliberate.

Chat: The “chat” function on Facebook operates similarly to other online forms of instant messaging, though one may only chat with Facebook friends who are currently logged in to Facebook. When a person is online and available to chat, their name will appear in a pop-up list with a circle indicating their availability, which is further determined by the color of the circle (green for available, grey for inactive). Chatting on Facebook is private in the sense that only the two participating chatters can see the content of their conversation. The general rules of conversation can be followed more closely in chatting than in other forms of online communication because the back and forth is more or less instantaneous. Many aspects are noticeably different, however. For example, during a chat, the two participants may be typing simultaneously, despite there being indicators within the chat window that tell when one person is typing. This is in contrast to a face-to-face conversation, in which talking over someone may be considered rude. There is also an audible noise every time a new chat message is received. This function is convenient when one is chatting with multiple individuals at the same time, or if one is looking at another window on their computer. If more than one chat is occurring at the same time, new chat messages will also be indicated by a small red speech bubble that will appear next to the name of the sender.

In a “chat,” one may expect the conversation to stay on topic, whereas in a “Wall post” the relevance may be less important. Similarly, a “message” may be acceptably longer, whereas long “comments” are rarely read in entirety or appreciated. A common difference for all of these means of communicating is the

manner in which they occur. What is removed in an online context is the physical connection that one may have in a face-to-face conversation. Even on the telephone, one has the ability to communicate tone in addition to the spoken message, whereas on the Internet, tone and body language are absent.

Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA, in his book, *Silent Messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*, developed an “equation” for conversations that describes proportionally how humans communicate messages, including the verbal meaning in addition to the non-verbal meaning.

$$\text{Total [communication]} = 7\% \text{ verbal} + 38\% \text{ vocal} + 55\% \text{ body language}$$

-(Mehrabian, 1971: 77)

Within this equation, Mehrabian is claiming that 93% of human messages are communicated using tone of voice, body language and facial expressions. It is important to understand that Mehrabian’s equation adds yet another dimension to understanding Bergmann’s communication genres and Grice’s cooperation principle within conversations, especially in regards to informal communication.

Gossip is more than just the words exchanged. And therefore, when we look at face-to-face gossip, we can see how this equation fits within our framework. With the ability to read people’s body language, we can determine sincerity and trustworthiness. When we can hear people’s voices, we can interpret their evaluative tone.

In online environments, it appears that we lose most of the message whenever we establish communication with someone. This problem is partially remedied by the fact that online communication, Facebook especially, is usually

composed of correspondences between friends or acquaintances whose body language, habits and feelings in generally are known prior to the online communication. From this point of view, I argue that communication via SNS serves more as a supplement to face-to-face interactions, opposed to replacing face-to-face intercourse. That being said, we have all had the experience of sending an email, or leaving a Facebook Wall post, that gets misinterpreted and hurt feelings or confusion ensue. Thus, the *manner* in which we communicate online is greatly altered from face-to-face interactions, and much more care must be placed on the first three conversational guidelines (quality, quantity and relevance).

This online dilemma is indirectly recognized, and further mediated, through the rise in popularity of “emoticons,” or facial gestures communicated through typed symbols. While these cyber-gestures appear small, their actual emotional communicative impacts are substantial. We will see later how the simple act of inserting an emoticon in a message can change the entire meaning of the words.

While gossip follows specific guidelines when taken in the context of a conversation, it remains that gossip in and of itself has unique characteristics as a genre of communication that go beyond the Cooperation Principle. The following section will outline those characteristics in detail.

CHAPTER 4

Gossip Characteristics

The guidelines discussed above (quality, quantity, relevance, and manner) occur in unique combinations that in part help us to understand the genre of conversation in which we are participating. Therefore, a person can easily recognize a gossipy conversation when one sees (or hears) one (Bergmann, 1987). The questions remain regarding what characteristics compose gossip specifically, and how these relate to the principles of conversation as outlined out by Grice and Bergmann. In this section, I will outline the eight characteristics that I have developed to illustrate gossip. Furthermore, in this section I will discuss how these traditional characteristics of gossip translate into gossip online, what I am referring to as “cyber-gossip.”

1) **Gossip conversations are social in nature.** I am reminded of my grandmother gossiping with her friends over coffee after church, not unlike the three old maids who opened this discussion. Gossip in such situations enters the realm of phatic communion, in which speech is used to create a social atmosphere rather than impart information. Whether the topic of conversation is new relationship drama, a rival getting promoted, or who be/de-friended whom on Facebook, gossip is firmly reliant on social situations. People are interested in the on-goings of their peers and group members (McAndrew et al., 2007). The act of gossiping can itself be a social event, which can then be gossiped about in the future and so on and so forth (Bergmann, 1987: 35).

This aspect of gossip evokes most aspects of the Cooperation Principle. As gossip is a social feature, the social situation will determine most specifically the quality and quantity

of the information communicated, in addition to relevance and manner. Among women, perhaps the quantity and quality of information may be more important within the social atmosphere in which they are interacting. For men who generally talk (or gossip) less (Tannen, 2007:120-122), perhaps relevant and quality information are more important. Additionally, both gendered situations may require a different manner of delivery (leaning forwarding or maintaining personal space, making eye contact or having eyes diverted towards something else). In a study by Levin and Arluke (1985), the researchers found that women did in fact gossip more than men (71% for women compared to 64% for men (Levin and Arluke, 1985)), but the amount of derogatory and positive content was equal for both genders. This indicates that while the quantity of the information being shared may differ, the quality is not based on gender.

There is no doubt that gossip is still a social activity on Facebook. Almost every interaction on Facebook, gossip or not, is social in nature. However, traditional gossip differs from cyber-gossip in some ways. We have discussed some cases in which the mode of interaction (“manner”) online may either become irrelevant, or change dramatically, such that the quality, quantity and relevance of the information becomes more important to convey appropriate meaning. That being said, the physical manner accompanying a message can sometimes be replaced by an emoticon, such as a smile face ☺, or a sad face ☹. As we will see over the course of this thesis, communication and manner of communication become very important for creating social bonds. Thus, it is in these areas that we see a more drastic adaptation in online communities in order to compensate for lack of visual body language and tone.

2.) Gossip consists of reconstructions of some past event, either positive or negative. While the timing of the delivery varies, it is generally agreed upon that

individuals gossip about events that have already happened or that they heard about already happening. As gossip serves to instruct upon and maintain norms and values, it is necessary that the information be based on an actual occurrence for which the consequences are already apparent. One can learn from others' mistakes or triumphs by hearing about them, but this can only happen if the event has already passed and the story is being recounted.

An exception to this rule would be a gossipy situation in which one person speculates about the future actions of a third party. For example, if a woman was an obnoxious book club member in the past, one may speculate that she will be obnoxious in the future. Generally speaking, though, a speculation has some basis in a past event.

It must be assumed that gossip consists of a quality recount of the past (Bergmann, 1987:35). In other words, gossip must be based off of *factual* events of the past. Much of the hype around the denunciation of gossip stems from the confusion between gossip and rumor, or in extreme cases, between gossip and lies. In this discussion, I hold that gossip is not synonymous with rumor, and that gossip must be a truthful account of a past event that does not intentionally exceed what is known to be true. This point is somewhat tricky as gossipy conversations may tend to exaggerate the truth or the content may change from one conversation to a subsequent conversation occurring at a later time, not from malice but stemming from a misunderstanding of the initial conversation. This "telephone" effect, often demonstrated in a game with children who try to pass on a message by whispering a sentence one at a time around a circle, demonstrates how easy it is for the content or quality of a message to change through the natural inaccuracies of verbal communication. Furthermore, phatic communion, "language used in free, aimless social intercourse" (Malinowski, 1923), puts more emphasis on the social aspects of conversation rather than the quality of the information. Nevertheless, for gossip to continue to function as it does in

various facets of social interaction, there must be a basis of truth to the content of the conversation.

We discussed earlier how gossip is difficult to study on Facebook because it has a bias towards positively valenced information. This is not to suggest that this second characteristic of gossip, truthful accounts of the past, does not hold true on Facebook. Comments, status updates, even photographs, act as cyber-records of past events. Individuals who are privy to the context of the comment, status update or photo may also be able to learn from the past experience, thereby demonstrating that cyber-gossip can still serve one of the traditional roles of gossip, social learning, online.

3.) **The subject of the gossip is absent from the conversation.** When it comes to gossip, audience and discretion matter. If the subject of the gossip is present, the gossip will not have the same effects, nor will it be of the same quality as it would if the subject were absent. This is a result in part of one's general desire to be truthful in the account, in addition to the desire to avoid direct confrontation if possible. Talking about the subject while the subject is present, in particular when the content is negative, generally makes people defensive or uncomfortable and is generally frowned upon in American culture (this is distinguished from being upfront with people, which is not frowned upon in American culture, but also serves different means). The *discretion* evoked when sharing gossip is one of the main contributing factors to gossip being influential and effective.

An example of why this rule is so important can be seen in a case study performed by Don Handelman (1973), in which the researcher analyzed "gossip encounters" that took place within a "sheltered workshop" in Jerusalem. The unique circumstance of this study involved participants gossiping about each other despite occupying the same room. The gossipers used different devices to separate conversations or create boundaries, such as

temporarily excluding the subject of the gossip by manipulating the physical direction of the conversation and eye contact, or by referring to the subject with third-person pronouns (Handelman, 1973). Within this confined space, gossipers attempted to talk behind the backs of the subjects. The author concludes that gossip upset social arrangements within the workshop and therefore was destructive to the stability of the social environment. I am arguing that this is most certainly due to the low levels of discretion evoked by the gossipers. Had the gossipers and the subjects of the gossip not been in each other's presence, I hypothesize that the social environment would have been preserved, or even enhanced, depending on the nature of the gossip.

In most instances, the avoidance of being overheard by the subject of the gossip would have implications for the manner in which gossip is shared. The stereotype paints a picture of one person whispering in the ear of another person, one hand cupped over their mouth out of discretion. In my personal experience, when someone is about to gossip to me about someone else, they quickly scan around us before speaking, generally using in a soft voice just in case the subject appears unexpectedly. Other aspects of manner implicated here would be the tone of the gossip. If the gossip was scorned or spited, their tone may be angry or catty. If the gossip was impressed or pleased, their tone may reflect these sentiments. We see here again how Mehrabian's equation comes into play as the "vocal feeling" contributes to the meaning of the gossip.

There are major implications for this third characteristic of gossip that arise within an online environment. As controlling for what is public and what is private becomes increasingly difficult online, one can see how gossip may be forced to operate with different characteristics. This is especially true on SNS sites like Facebook, as the idea of the "social network" is inherently *not* private. Ellison et al. (2007) found that at the time of their study, most (70%) of their study participants, who were students, did not know about privacy

settings, or purposefully allowed their profile to be visible to their entire network. While one could argue that the “network” is not the general public because it does have exterior boundaries, the information shared is still being exposed to an audience to which it would not have been exposed offline, thereby implying that the information becomes more public than private.

4.) **Gossip is generally evaluative in nature, either positively or negatively** (Bergmann, 1987). This is what distinguishes gossip from simply the sharing of social information or the describing of a situation. The difference between a plain statement and an evaluative statement can be as simple as inserting adverbs into one’s comment. For example, *Greg likes to run*, versus, *Greg runs, but rather slowly*. This characteristic largely evokes Mehrabian’s idea about tone and body language being predominate indicators of meaning, as well. Other examples exist that also differentiate evaluative statements from general statements, which would have altered meanings depending on tone.

Often times, the evaluative elements come not from the direct approach of conveying information, but from more subtle forms of manipulating language to express meaning. For example (from Grice, 1975), a comment such as *Sally went to Notre Dame* is not a gossip statement because there is no evaluative nature to the comment. On the other hand, if the comment was something like: *Sally grew up poor, but she went to Notre Dame*, then the implicature⁸ of this situation is that Sally’s socio-economic status could have had some

⁸Grice’s main claim was not in defining language and conversation specifically, but to develop his theory of *implicature*, which outlines the delicate use of implication in everyday conversation. Grice differentiates between two types of implicature: conventional and conversational.

Conventional implicature is based in the semantics of language, using words such as “so” or “but.” As in the example above, “Sally grew up poor, *but* she went to Notre Dame.” What is being said in this situation is that Sally’s socioeconomic status may have affected her chances of going to a university, but she succeeded despite the odds. The implicitum is that perhaps Sally was incredibly intelligent, or that her success outlook was grim due to her household’s income.

effect on her going to a university, and the fact that she went to Notre Dame is an *impressive* or *surprising* achievement.

Evaluative information is difficult to portray online in the absence of tone and body language. To some degree the evaluative content can be conveyed as described above (by inserting adverbs into a comment, or by adding strategic clauses to the end of a sentence). However, as we have been describing, the public nature of cyber-gossip creates a bias of positive information being shared on Facebook. Therefore, any negatively valenced, evaluative information may be in the form of sarcasm, inside jokes or other discreet gestures that can only be understood by friends who are “in the know.”

5.) Gossip is an informal means of communication.

“I heard it through the grapevine, not much longer would you be mine. Oh I heard it through the grapevine, Oh and I'm just about to lose my mind. Honey, honey yeah...”

-Motown Labels (1966)

The term “heard it through the grapevine” was in effect at least a century before the popular song topped the charts in 1968 (from both Gladys Knight and the Pips, and Marvin Gaye). The term “grapevine telegraph,” was inspired by the ground breaking new technology developed in 1844 that made informal communication faster and easier than

Conversational implicature is dependent upon an intentional violation of one of the four aspects of the Cooperative Principle (quantity, quality, relevance, and manner). For example, if in a conversation someone suddenly says something seemingly out of context, the listener would assume that the speaker is implying something, opposed to radically changing the subject. Likewise, in the case of Sally going to Notre Dame, such a standard statement could be rendered evaluative depending on: a) the body language evoked, b) the tone in which the comment was made (the manner), c) prior comments in the conversation, or d) Sally’s known personal history (quality).

ever before. Some say that the name was derived from the twisted cord of the older model telegraph machines, which resembles the tendrils of a grapevine. Others claim the term comes from the informal word of mouth communication that wound its way amongst those who could not afford to use the telegraph.

The term remains in the contemporary lexicon referring to informal communication channels, which often include gossip. Information enters into and leaves the grapevine freely, yet discreetly within groups. We discussed earlier how gossip tends to flow against official channels, or at least tends to meander around them. If gossip were considered a formal means of communication, there would not be so many sanctions against it. Furthermore, if gossip were a formal means of communication, it would be highly regulated by a ruling body. If gossip about the Tunisian fruit seller had been transferred through formal channels, it most certainly would not have gotten very far. In the words of Bergmann, in regards to gossip not falling within the range of socially sanctioned conversational genres, “it [falls] through the normative grid. It [is] treated like a poor relative of conversation...” (1987: 23). And yet, gossip’s informal nature allows it to serve larger social purposes such as policing cheaters without permanently alienating group members, or augmenting one’s reputation without making a public broadcast, which might actually harm one’s reputation for being boastful or egocentric.

We discussed at the beginning of this thesis how there are times when people are uncomfortable communicating boldly or openly (recall the example of the employees who were unwilling to write negative comments about their superiors’ performance). I argue that SNS such as Facebook provide one more degree of separation from individuals and their social environment. For individuals who spend part or most of their days under a strict and formal hierarchy, this type of separation can be liberating. This is not to suggest that shy employees will be more willing to talk trash about their boss online, but rather

that participation and initiation of communication for some may be easier online (Ellison et al., 2007).

Bergman identifies a concept known as a “hierarchy of notification” (1987: 46), in which individuals become privy to news in an order congruent with the “kind of relation that exists between the transmitter and the receiver.” Such an informal network of communication is related to the grapevine complex. In other words, important personal news may be first transferred to the closest friends and family, and lesser friends and family second. This type of hierarchy is not restricting; rather, the order in which we learn news demonstrates to us how important we are to the person with the news. Friendships thrive off this tempered imbalance. Children grow up have best friends, or a few special friends. Individual love and special affection are necessary for people. It prevents society members from feeling like just a face in a crowd. If my best friend was going to have a baby, I would hope to be one of the first people to know (following perhaps her significant other and family). Our friendship is asserted by informing each other first (or near to first) of important news; our alignment on each other’s notification hierarchies speaks to the importance of our friendship. If I discover that some other friend found out before me, I may be hurt, or begin questioning my friend’s devotion to me.

Facebook can be detrimental to the “notification hierarchy.” Walther et al. (2008), in their article, “The role of friends’ appearance and behavior on evaluations of individuals on Facebook: Are we known by the company we keep?”, describe how Facebook not only facilitates outgoing communication, but also contributes to individuals finding out important information about their friends. We can see, therefore, how Facebook might contribute to the dissolving of notification hierarchies, and thereby eliminate an important indicator of a friend’s love as an informal transmission of news becomes depersonalized.

Laura Gurak, in her book *Cyber Literacy*, describes how there are certain features to online interactions that are more or less universal: speed, reach, anonymity, and interaction (Gurak, 2001: 29-46). In applying these four features of online communication to Facebook, we can see the first two as describing the spread of one's news or gossip through informal channels online (e.g. the Facebook Newsfeed). The second two features describe how the news or gossip reaches an unspecific audience while connecting to more people simultaneously. SNS such as Twitter thrive off of this type of notification information sharing. Facebook, with functions such as "status updates" and the "Newsfeed" provide Facebook friends with updates on happenings within minutes of the occurrence. If gossip is going to occur about the new event, it can be transferred faster and to a more far reaching audience.

Meanwhile, we can also see how this type of informal information sharing can be detrimental to previous social constructs, such as the traditional face-to-face notification hierarchy, which no longer serves to define social groups and relationships as effectively as when social groups were reinforced through face-to-face notifications alone.

6.) Gossip has a strong inclusion or exclusion element. As mentioned earlier, Max Gluckman was one of the first researchers to describe gossip in terms of positively demarcating groups through gossip in his paper, "Gossip and scandal." His article recounts various ethnographies, including the work of Elizabeth Colson, whose research emphasizes the social utility of gossip amongst the Makah Indian tribe in the late 1970s. The idea that gossip maintains group solidarity is a construct based on the general premise that groups are exclusive in nature, meaning that they include some people, generally those with already similar or shared norms and values, and exclude other people, generally those with differing norms and values. This is often not a conscious occurrence, but the result of a

tendency for people to align themselves with others who are like them. We see evidence for these types of social groupings in everything from political affiliations to birthday parties. Newspapers and news networks are also examples of social groups with shared norms and values. For individuals who value satire as a form of social criticism and raising awareness about contemporary issues, *The Onion* may be found in their back pockets. Individuals interested in more straightforward, no strings attached, cutting edge news may tune in to *NPR*. People opt-in, opt-out and opt-to-overlap with these groups based on preference and their values.

It becomes difficult to identify social groups on Facebook, as one's network can include over one hundred friends⁹. However, Lewis et al. (2008), in their article, "Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com," found that exclusiveness between groups could also be achieved, though perhaps not intentionally, by displaying pictures with the same individuals appearing regularly. Additionally, I discussed earlier how certain types of communication on Facebook also contribute to the inclusionary or exclusionary nature of bonded social groups in terms of, for example, inside jokes left on other friends' Walls. I would also add that the leaving of messages on select friends' Walls could also indicate close friends or bonded social groups. (An interesting study may be one that expands on Lewis et al. (2008)'s research to see if offline friend groups correlate with the frequency of sending messages, leaving posts, leaving comments or chatting with the same people.)

We can see, then, that even in online settings, groups can exist and use exclusion in defining group membership, even if these connections are not readily apparent to outsiders.

⁹ According to the Facebook Statistics page, <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, the average Facebook users has 130 friends, though I hypothesize that more meaningful set of data would be the number of friends one has as a function of age. For example, in taking a random poll of ten people I know between the ages of 18-25 who are on Facebook, they have on average 542.8 friends. In contrast, if I take a random poll of ten people I know over the age of 40 who are on Facebook they average 152.7 friends.

7.) Gossip is a means of interpreting norms and values and exploring how a judgment is made. A group can decide which judgments are appropriate to assign to a particular occurrence by discussing the event while taking into consideration the group's norms and values. For example, there is no doubting the effects of media-gossip on public judgment. One need only look at cases such as the 2008 election of President Obama, or rather, the non-election of Senator John McCain with former-governor Sarah Palin as his running partner, to see the power of large-scale gossip in contributing to public opinion. Within this example, the media-gossip contributes to public opinion, but it does not automatically create public judgment.

We will discuss this characteristic of gossip in more depth in Chapter 6. In the meantime, it should be understood that cyber-gossip, too, serves an interpretative function. Cyber-gossip, such as a series of evaluative comments left underneath a photograph, provides interpretative information about the subject of the gossip such that participants in the gossip, or viewers of the comments, can form judgments.

8.) Gossip is considered to be a traditionally private practice of sharing information. While *about* others, gossip is not shared widely with others. As mentioned in point number three (about the subject of the gossip being absent from the conversation), the privacy of gossip is in part what makes gossip an effective form of discourse. Gossip being private, gossip being exclusive and gossip being about third parties are three distinct characteristics. First, it is not only the subject of the gossip who is excluded from the gossip, but others as well. Usually, only members of the bonded social group are privy to gossip from other members within that group. Secondly, this nature of privacy differs from the exclusive component in that the exclusive component serves predominately to define

groups. The private element, while contributing to the exclusive component, is essential for gossip to serve other purposes, such as an informal means of control, or to manage reputations in a non-inflated way.

The privacy element to gossip is one case in which face-to-face interactions *do* include an “intentional actor” (as addressed in Tracy, 1991). When two (or more) people are gossiping, there is usually an obvious intentionality to their discretion, as seen in the cautionary glancing around and lowered voices. Some conversations even begin with a caveat such as “You didn’t hear it from me,” or “Don’t tell so-and-so I told you, but...” Thus, in this particular situation, it becomes clear that at least one of the conversational goals is to keep the conversation as private as possible.

One of the major adaptations that gossip undergoes in its jump to cyberspace is the rearrangement of public and private information. Online, private gossip may no longer be as private as previously thought. With interactions facilitated on Facebook, the content of the shared information enters a new realm that must be navigated carefully so as to not damage reputations or friendships. Status updates or posts and comments left on others’ Walls must be somewhat strategic so as to be in line with the post-er’s online persona, or in line with the intent of their message since most non-verbal communication is eliminated in online environments.

On Facebook, private contracts (i.e. romantic relationships), which used to be between two people, known to their friends, family and perhaps close colleagues or peers, become public knowledge. Greg Bowe (2010), in his article, “Reading romance: The impact Facebook rituals can have on a romantic relationship,” describes how personal relationships are often disclosed or publically announced online. By proclaiming one’s relationship to be

“Facebook” official”¹⁰, one announces to their entire network their romantic status as “taken,” or “unavailable.”

We can see from this example how there is no longer need to gossip about who is involved with whom, as the announcement is publically made on Facebook. These types of announcements serve multiple functions within the Facebook environment. Being in a relationship on Facebook announces that the people involved are abiding by a set of norms and values within society (and on Facebook, which has its own norms and values). People seek to present themselves and their relationships in an ideal way (abiding by norms and values), which aims to “[affirm] superiority” (Bowe, 2010) and success within society.

While relationship statuses may no longer be private on Facebook, these actions of becoming Facebook official, or breaking up on Facebook, can be fuel for other forms of cyber-gossip. Unless deleted by the profile owner, all of these changes in relationship-status are left on one’s Facebook Wall as a sort of “romance archive” (Bowe, 2010). Just as gossip lingers in the collective memory of a group and can be evoked at relevant moments (discussed further in Chapter 7), so do these “behavioral residues” (Walther et al., 2008) have a tendency to resurface in relevant moments. In this sense, gossip, in the form of old messages, Wall comments or photos with tags and/or comments, ceases to be an ephemeral event. A profile owner’s decision to remove, de-tag or delete old romances from their Facebook can be an indicator to the new significant other of their importance. Or, contrarily, it can be a signal to the old significant other that the profile user has either moved on, or is angry about breaking up (see Chapter 10). Many people find it satisfying

¹⁰ Facebook gives users the opportunity to declare their sexual orientation as well as advertise with whom they are involved. If two people agree to be in a relationship (what has become known as making a relationship “Facebook official”), a heart icon appears in the personal information displayed at the top of their profile page. In addition, the news is posted on the Walls of both people entering the relationship. If a two people (or even one person) decides to end the relationship on Facebook, a broken heart icon is posted on their Wall, and the heart icon in their personal information disappears. One can choose to further specify the details of the relationship by choosing from multiple options: In a relationship, Engaged, Married, It’s complicated, In an open relationship, Widowed, Separated, or Divorced.

and cathartic to delete their old romance from their Facebook repertoire as a symbol of the ending of the relationship. This type of behavior sometimes comes to be expected as Facebook, too, has its own set of norms and values. Failure to keep up with public self-presentation results in questions from friends or significant others.

CHAPTER 5

Gossiping in Groups

Thus far in this discussion, I have been using the term “group” in a simplified manner. Loosely, a group can be seen as any collection of people who share common norms, values and beliefs. A mini-culture, if you will. What this simplification fails to take into account is the varying degrees in which people are connected. Therefore, I feel that it is necessary to address what exactly I mean by “group” and how these constructions have come to exist in society.

The nature of groups, as arrangements of like people, who share bonds, activities and commonalties, brings and ties people together. Establishment in a community group makes leaving that group undesirable as one becomes invested through relationships, lifestyle, habits and even proximity to necessary resources. Thus, anything that would contribute to the success of those communities in which group members are highly invested would be favorable and incorporated into daily life.

Throughout the following chapter, I will describe the framework surrounding groups and how they function in society, specifically:

- how groups form around centralized norms and values,
- how adaptations can occur on a group level, which is necessary for the group-serving theory behind gossip,
- how the sizes of groups that humans occupy form,
- how gossip contributes to maintaining those groups,
- how the tendency for people to occupy multiple-bonded social groups occurs, and finally,
- how all of these group dynamics operate in an online context.

It is not uncommon for researchers of anthropology, sociology or psychology to turn to evolutionary biology or behavioral ecology to explain human behavior, including gossip. As will be made clear shortly, this discussion will lay the foundation for an understanding of gossip benefitting individuals on a group level.

As far as we know, we are the only extant species that lives in groups facilitated in part by gossip, but our behavior can nevertheless be compared to how many organisms behave—both in groups and individually. For example, Wilson et al. (2000) use the example of social insect colonies to support their claim that adaptations can occur on the group level, not solely on an individual level. Group level adaptations are often scrutinized from a biological point of view, as natural selection is thought to occur only on an individual level. However, as Wilson et al. (2000) point out, Darwin also recognized that there are certain adaptations that benefit the group, but may have negative consequences for the individual. They conclude that “groups can evolve into adaptive units by their own right,” but only when examined at the group level. In other words, if we look at the group as the entity in question, then the group can be seen as evolving, but the benefits of this adaptation must outweigh the *intergroup* selection pressures (selection pressures at the individual level within the group), otherwise the group-level adaptation would not be successful. The success of a group-level adaptation is a function of the degree to which group-level adaptations are important for a given species, and how strongly these adaptations are opposed by other evolutionary forces.

For example, in honey bee colonies, as described by Wilson et al. (2000), all female workers bees have the reproductive capacity to lay eggs of their own, in addition to the queen bee, whose primary role is laying eggs. However, because worker bees laying eggs of their own would be destructive to the colony (disrupting kinship bonds, hive loyalties, social hierarchy, etc.), if one bee violates this norm within the colony, other bees are likely to

attack her and eat her eggs. Cheating in terms of laying one's own eggs is costly to the individual due to the risk of being attacked and the certainty of not succeeding, which would outweigh the benefit of laying one's own eggs and passing on one's own genes. Posing an attack on the cheater may be dangerous to the attacker, as well, such that the benefit of warding off the cheater must outweigh the costs of potential injury. In this scenario, Wilson et al. (2000) posit that there are at least two different opportunities for individuals to be *self-serving*—choosing to lay eggs, and choosing not to attack—but as the success of the colony is more beneficial in the long run, and success is largely increased due to “good citizenship” (either not laying eggs, or attacking a cheater), these *group-serving* behaviors are propagated (Wilson et al., 2000).

When such an idea is applied to gossip, Wilson et al. (2000) describe how gossip is characterized by being a group serving behavior, especially when gossip informs the group of the misdoings of other group members, or betters the reputation of the group as a whole such that the group is advertised as being successful. For example, successful sororities or fraternities will benefit from positive gossip about their members, which reflects on the group as a whole, so as to attract the best new members in the future.

Additionally, groups and the potency of gossip are largely dependent upon a group abiding by a shared set of norms and values. For example, Merry (1997) describes how the utility of gossip as a behavior regulating tool is dependent upon the closeness of the gossiping group, and whether or not they all share the same values and norms. She says, “...only when gossipers share moral views is the soil fertile for gossip.” She argues that the more dependent the group members are on each other, the more influence gossip has within that group. In response to the ever present debate about whether gossip is self-serving or group-serving, Merry makes an argument for how gossip can be both simultaneously.

Merry describes different situations from her research in an Eastern city, each including a different group of people. The first group she discusses involves a very close-knit neighborhood of Chinese residents. She describes the importance of gossip and how powerful the effects of the gossiping can be in terms of social control.

In contrast, Merry also spent time within an African American community in an adjacent neighborhood that was normatively diverse. She describes how gossip travels freely within the community, but the effects of the gossip are not nearly as powerful because the community is divided based on their values and norms. Merry describes this as, “without consensus or collective action” gossip is impotent.

Gossip Grooming

We have seen how gossip can operate on a group level, and we have discussed briefly how groups are based on various forms of commonality. In addition, to help understand human groups to a greater extent, Robin Dunbar, a Professor of Psychology at Liverpool and author of *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (1996) proposes two theories based on his work with primates and surveys of sociological population data. The first theory states that human group sizes are limited on average to 150 individuals (including friends, family and colleagues that one has grown close to throughout one’s life.) However, in terms of time constraints and other logistical issues, early humans may not have been able to manage groups that large with the devices used by their ancestors (non-human primates). Thus, Dunbar presents a second theory: gossip and language help to maintain solidarity within larger groups, similar to the way grooming maintains solidarity within non-human primate groups. Gossiping operates similar to grooming for non-human primates by enforcing group cohesion and decreasing tension. As group sizes increase, it

becomes more practical to gossip than to groom, as grooming takes more time and one can realistically only groom one friend at a time.

Whether to protect against predation, to increase access to food or other resources, or to assist in raising and looking after offspring, primate species have evolved into larger social groups over evolutionary time, with humans occupying social groups three times as large as our ape relatives. Aiello and Dunbar (1993) propose that the reason for this enormous jump in group size in humans in particular could be due to the increased predation risk of early hominoids living on grasslands, which offer less protection than denser forests. Alternatively, our ancestors may have sought protection from other hominoid groups, who may have been competing for resources. Or, due to the nomadic nature of early hominoids, who had to migrate following food and water sources, maintaining alliances with more individuals would have made this latter point more successful, as interacting with others would be inevitable.

Due to the increased group size, researchers have looked into various changes in morphology and behavior as by-products of these larger social groups. Researchers (see Aiello and Dunbar, 1993; Robin Dunbar, 1992, 1993, 1996) have proposed that primates have evolved larger neocortices to allow for living in larger groups, which in turn includes more complex social interactions and more complex cooperation strategies¹¹. Dunbar describes how increasing the size of a group requires keeping track of exponentially more relationships and coalitions. As the group becomes larger, one must update their “social

¹¹ Dunbar explains how keeping track of up to 150 connections is actually not as simplistic as it seems. According to Dunbar, “the number of neocortical neurons limits the organism’s information processing capacity,” which limits the number of relationships one organism can manage at one time (Dunbar, 1992). One of the differences between primates, with their larger neocortices, and other group living animals, is the ability for primates to not only keep track of the relationships between themselves and others, but to be aware of third party alliances and conflicts that exist between the others. If you accidentally groom your best friend’s enemy, your best friend will probably be angry. Alternatively, if your best friend gets in a fight with your mother-in-law, you may need to know that it’s best to sit the bench on this one. Being successful in a social group requires navigating these relationships. An average human group of 150 means that you have 150 relatively strong connections with people, but you also know how those 150 people are connected to each other.

map” to know who to trust, who is friends with whom, who will back whom in a fight, etc. (Dunbar, 1996: 66). This sophisticated use of social knowledge, and the ability to solve social problems has been referred to as “Machiavellian Intelligence”¹² (see Dunbar, 1996: 60-69; Hrdy, 2009: 45-47; Mesoudi et al., 2006).

Dunbar’s central argument states: “The exchange of social information (i.e., gossip) has been crucial to our ability as a species to evolve into large social groups” (Dunbar, 2004). During his extensive research on social-living, non-human primates, Dunbar raises a parallel between language—in particular *gossip*—and social grooming. The act of social grooming among non-human primates has been well studied by primatologists who generally agree that grooming is largely adaptive to social living by mediating tension between group members and forming high quality (opposed to quantity) bonds; in addition, of course, to removing parasites and debris. Similar to a therapeutic massage, being groomed releases endorphins, and as such, is a way to sooth irritation, aggression and anxiety.

Dunbar’s research follows this general consensus concerning primate sociality, but by claiming that language (he uses the term ‘gossip’ specifically) has become the new “social grooming” among humans, Dunbar proposes an addition to the theory of the evolution of language: language evolved in part so that humans could gossip-groom more often and with more group members. Dunbar argues that gossip achieves similar coalition forming and soothing effects, and as such, language (or gossip) has evolved to replace physical

¹² Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, in her book, *Mothers and Others: The Evolution of Mutual Understanding*, describes how the Machiavellian Intelligence hypothesis explains how primates can “keep track of the intricate and fluctuating statuses of other group members so as to select and maintain advantageous allies when competing with fellows” (Hrdy, 2009: 45). In addition, Hrdy describes how this advanced social intelligence allows for behaviors such as loyalty, deception, cooperation and “planning.” Robin Dunbar also emphasizes that this type of social intelligence allows group members to learn the patterns of their peers and therefore predict the behavior of their peers in the future, which can help in defining the types of relationships that form between individuals (Dunbar, 1996: 60). In a 1993 article, Dunbar has offered an alternative hypothesis referred to as the “social brain hypothesis” (Dunbar, 1993), which is closely tied to the Machiavellian Intelligence hypothesis.

grooming with verbal grooming. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy describes how our early hominoid ancestors were unique from their close primate relatives (chimpanzees) due not necessarily to their ability to use complex language, but due to their desire to “share one another’s mental states and inner feelings” (2009: 38). Whether from the sender's or receiver’s point of view, the exchange of gossip can be a relationship-forming experience, as both parties desire to build bonds by sharing their mental states and feelings. These types of bonds, in addition to larger neocortices, are necessary for the success and health of larger social groups and for the prevention of costly divisions.

In short, because language is not restricted to one-on-one interactions, and can be done while multi-tasking, Dunbar argues that the human ability to chit-chat allowed ancestral humans to successfully live in social communities that were almost three times the size of non-human primate social groups. One can imagine how groups would become so large that physically grooming all group members would become impractical, and thus language would become necessary to fill in the role of social grooming (Aiello and Dunbar, 1993).

For example, imagine walking into a ballroom full of 150 your friends and relatives. You know everyone in the room, and you know the degree to which they know and get along with each other. Even if you were standing on the balcony overlooking the entire dance floor, it would be impossible for you to observe everyone in the room at the same time, let alone remember the details. And yet, it is advantageous for you (and the group) to keep track of the comings and goings of your group members. You never know when a rival might show up and steal your date, or when your best friend might break out a killer dance move that you want to learn, or when your arch enemy will strike up a new alliance. This type of information may influence who you can trust or distrust in the future. As a result, you must find out details about your peers from others. Being able to communicate

happenings from the past (even if it's only the recent past) and to keep tabs on other group members is an important aspect of group living. Arguably, gossip would be favorable in this regard due not only to its tendency to disclose the nitty-gritties (the important details) of people's comings and goings, but also because gossip travels through the grapevine quickly. In other words, information is relevant and not outdated. An additional benefit to gossip is that it prevents group members from automatically imitating members of society who may be powerful and/or successful, but who are unwilling to give up their power even if they are no longer performing effectively.

The ballroom example, however, may be overly simplistic. Most of the world's population is concentrated in towns and cities ranging in size from a couple hundred to a couple hundred thousand people. How does this fit with Dunbar's number? It must be acknowledged that Dunbar's 150-member cap on group size is a theory explaining the evolution of human groups. It was not long ago that humans lived (and some still do) in communities about this size. In the context of towns and cities, we must understand Dunbar's number not in terms of the number of people in close proximity to each other, but rather as a number describing the close, "reciprocated" relationships one has over the course of their lifetime (Dunbar, 2010a).

Dunbar refers to gossip in regards to the type of communication being shared as a means of social grooming and raising social awareness, and so the question arises, how much do people really gossip? Alex Mesoudi et al. (2006) report in their paper, "A social bias in cultural transmission,"¹³ that gossip and social material are transmitted in "greater

¹³ Mesoudi et al. (2006)'s study involved 40 participants who read a short paragraph from a booklet, and were then asked to write down what they remember from what they had read without turning back to the paragraph. This written report of the paragraph was then passed to another participant, who read the excerpt and wrote what he/she remembered. The process continued through four "generations," or transmissions. The responses were measured by coding the sentences using "propositional analysis," which involves separating out propositions (defined as "a predicate plus a series of ordered arguments"), which were then counted to measure "recall quantity" and "and recall accuracy."

quantities and with greater accuracy” than non-social material. They also concluded that what matters in the transmission is not the specific content per se, but rather that the material is *social* in nature (dealing with the interactions of other individuals) (Mesoudi et al., 2006). Dunbar et al. (1997), from their article “Human conversational behavior,” also found that 55% and 66.7% percent of men’s and women’s conversations, respectively, were “devoted to socially relevant topics”¹⁴.

This research and others would suggest that over half (as much as 65%-75% according to Dunbar, 1996) of human conversations are indeed dedicated to social issues, which would support Dunbar’s gossip-grooming theory. This is not to assume that over half of human conversations are *gossip*, but if the topic of the conversation is social in nature, then it can be assumed that at least some (probably more) of that conversation is evaluative and about third parties.

Overlapping Social Groups

It is important to note that in many communities one is rarely confined to only one social group. Rather, members of one group overlap into other bonded social groups simultaneously. It is important to keep in mind that gossip, too, may overlap between social groups. Gossip can circulate within individual groups, or jump into neighboring groups if there are enough common members.

They defined “gossip” material as “concerning intense third-party relationships and interactions,” “social” material as “concerning everyday third-party relationships and interactions,” and “non-social material” as “concerning interactions and relationships between a single person and the physical environment,” or as “concerning interactions and relationships solely within the physical environment.”

¹⁴ Dunbar et al. (1997) analyzed conversations in three different settings: 19 conversations from the London University cafeteria around lunchtime, 16 conversations from the University of Liverpool in the morning, and 10 conversations from random public places, such as bars and trains. The researchers would observe conversations with care to not be intrusive, and attempted to ensure that the participants were not strangers, as judged by tone and body language. Using a predetermined rubric, the researchers used a scan sampling method to determine how much time was spent on a category of conversation topics (e.g. personal relationships, sport/leisure, work/ academic, etc).

With the rise of the Internet and online SNS, I am arguing that these overlaps and jumps are happening more frequently. Certainly individuals were involved in multiple social groups before the 1990s (the decade in which the internet was most fervently incorporated into daily life), but the Internet and SNS have had large impacts on the involvement of individuals with multiple social groups, due not only to the facilitation of coordinating events, but also through the “grooming” in which they can partake online.

Groups Online

This brings us to an application of the traditional understanding of groups to Facebook friends and cyber-social groups. Zeynep Tufeki (2008), in her article “Grooming, gossip, Facebook and Myspace: What can we learn about social networking sites from non-users,” has proposed that social grooming has “gone online” in the form of wall posts, tagged photos and email messages. I argue that social grooming does not need to be distanced from gossip (Dunbar’s traditional verbal social grooming) in order to serve similar functions online. In fact, I argue that gossip has adapted to the online world of Facebook, and thereby continues to fulfill some of its traditional roles.

As Lewis et al. (2008) describe, in their paper “Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com,” defining the “cohort” boundaries within Facebook can be difficult. The difficulties of discerning group delineations may appear to be hurdles from a researcher’s point of view, but the appearance of the never-ending social connections on Facebook may actually be a deception. We discussed earlier how Robin Dunbar proposes that human social groups are restricted by the limitations in mental capacity for quality relationships due to the size of human neocortices, not by the number of times one can click “accept” on a friend request. In Dunbar’s own words, “you can add numbers on the

end, but you can't really change the patterns on the inside," excess friends are merely "voyeurs" into your life through your Facebook profile (Dunbar, 2010a). Likewise, an inaccurate conclusion would be one that asserted that one's social group size always correlates to the number of friends one has on Facebook. Rather, despite being connected to large amounts of people through SNS, our social groups may not actually be severely augmented above 150.

In the same study by Lewis et al. (2008), they observed, by measuring various similarity markers such as popular culture interests, that individuals who appear regularly in each other's photo albums on Facebook share the most commonalities in things such as movies, books and music. These individuals are also found to occupy similar subgroups, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. As these types of taste indicators can be associated with certain norms and values, we can deduce that while perhaps defining friendships groups on Facebook by one's Facebook friends may be impractical and inaccurate as a marker of friendship circles, photo albums may actually portray accurate information in regards to social groups. Such a conclusion would be further supported by the findings of Ellison et al. (2007), in "The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites," whose research supports the idea that one of the three primary functions of Facebook is to serve as a medium through which friends with strong bonds stay in contact, in addition to maintaining looser ties, or "bridges," with acquaintances or old friends.

Bridging, Bonding and Gossip Relationships

The previous half of this section has outlined the significance of group size and the impact of language on those groups. Now we will turn to the nature of relationships within those groups.

Robert Putnam, professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, describes how these “so called” groups are actually clusters of “bridges” and “bonds,” which form commodities of social capital¹⁵ (Putnam, 2001: 22).

“Bridging” social ties involve looser, more far reaching connections. It has been argued that this type of social connection is most beneficial to one’s individual social success through the building of social capital. “Networking,” a popular term circulating in business and university environments, refers to a network of acquaintances on which one can call for advice, favors, jobs opportunities, information transfer, etc. One who is most successful in accumulating these network connections is said to be “getting ahead” faster than one with less social capital.

Social bridges have been taken to new heights with the integration of SNS into our social lives. Sites designed specifically for networking, such as LinkedIn.com, have facilitated the management of professional connections and networks. Similarly, sites such as Facebook offer important, unprecedented means through which otherwise distant friends can stay connected. In an article he wrote for the *New York Times*, “You’ve got to have (150) friends,” Dunbar himself acknowledges the importance of Facebook in maintaining friendships that would otherwise “wither away” (Dunbar, 2010).

¹⁵ Social capital, as defined by Putnam (2001:18-20), is the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” In essence, social capital captures the idea that social connections have value, both for the individual and the community as a whole.

“Bonding” social connections, in the way Putnam describes, is similar to what I have considered to compose the traditional, close-knit, interdependent, homogenous group with defined membership. In Putnam’s definition, bonded groups are exclusive in nature, and the characteristic bonding is essential to the solidarity of intimate groups who are inter-reliant for reciprocity and support. It is important to note that these bonded groups do not necessarily encompass 150 members in modern society. One’s social group, considered in the way Dunbar describes groups, and one’s bonded social group, considered in the way Putnam refers to groups, can be distinct. One may have multiple closely bonded groups that are all considered under the umbrella of one’s general social group. In the same *New York Times* article cited above, Dunbar addresses the issue that people come in and out of each other’s lives due to contemporary lifestyles. We may have clusters of friends all over the world who do not even know each other, and we gain or lose touch with those clusters depending on life events. A close friend can become a distant acquaintance in a matter of years. This is in stark contrast to not more than a century ago when 150 group members characterized both one’s general social group and one’s bonded social group (Dunbar, 2010).

Thus, a distinction must be made now between the 150 meaningful relationships one may have total, and the number of people with whom one may share gossip on a daily basis. I am arguing that bonded groups are necessary in order for traditional, informal, evaluative communication to circulate, and thereby facilitate social learning, social cohesion, trust, reciprocity and the deterrence of norm violators. That is, until we enter the world of social media.

It is my argument that gossip has not diminished on SNS such as Facebook, which are characterized largely by bridging social connections, but rather has adapted to operate in different, perhaps in more supplemental ways than in bonded groups.

Summary

In Part I, I have described how gossip in and of itself can be considered a communicative genre, and I have presented eight characteristics that make gossip a unique genre of communication. In these last three chapters I have outlined an approach to understanding gossip by narrowing in on three primary theorists of language. First, we looked at Jörg Bergman, with his insights into gossip being defined as a communicative genre. We saw how H.P. Grice, with his definition of the Cooperation Principle, in particular the four guidelines for defining and participating in particular types of communication, in addition to his attention to implicit communication, complemented Bergmann's proposal. Finally, Albert Mehrabian, who's equation for verbal and non-verbal communication further emphasizes Grice's points about the importance of implicature, and lays the foundation for some of the difficulties faced in analyzing discourse in an online environment (e.g. electronic communication, specifically online communication, which share the immediacy of face-to-face interactions, but lack the non-verbal communication usually ascribed to face-to-face conversations).

Additionally, in Chapter 3, I provided an outline of the primary means of communicating on Facebook (comments, messages, posts, etc.). I also discussed how they relate to the traditional guidelines for the communicative genre of gossip, which will be necessary to understand for further discussions of interpreting gossip online. In Chapter 4, I accumulated eight characteristics of gossip: 1) social, 2) about past events 3) about third parties, 4) evaluative, 5) informal, 6) exclusive, 7) a means of interpreting norms and values, and 8) private, which are unique to the communicative genre. Finally, chapter five outlined the evolution and structure of social groups in order to better understand the context in which gossip functions most effectively.

Part I has described how gossip is a legitimate genre of communication worthy of study. We have answered the question, *what* qualifies as gossip and *what* characterizes gossip. We have seen that gossip is complex, with many different factors that need to be considered when analyzing the ways in which gossip operates within society. However, now that we have legitimized and laid the foundation for gossip as a communicative genre, we will enter into Part II of this thesis, the “Rhetorical Functions of Gossip,” and discuss *how* gossip serves to maintain norms and values, particularly in an online environment.

PART II: Rhetorical Functions of Gossip

Introduction to Part II

Part II, will cover the five rhetorical aspects of gossip:

- Interpreting gossip using the three classical rhetorical species: epideictic, forensic and deliberative (Chapter 6)
- The learning of social norms and values through gossip (Chapter 7)
- Maintaining social cohesion through gossip (Chapter 8)
- The managing of reputation via gossip (Chapter 9)
- Enhanced cooperation and the policing of cheaters using gossip to affect reputations (Chapter 10)

Using the working definition of “rhetoric” as the strategic and instrumental use of language that inspires cooperative action (See Hauser, 2002), Part II will begin with a look at the roots of classical rhetoric. In a unique application of the three branches of oratory to gossip, we will see how together they outline the ways in which gossip serves as a means for interpreting norms and values. The purpose of this section is to liberate gossip from its traditional rhetorical definition, its exclusive affiliation with epideictic discourse, and broaden the previously narrow approach to understanding gossip.

Following, in Chapters 7 and 8, I will be discussing two rhetorical functions of gossip: social bonding and group cohesion, and the social learning of norms and values. Throughout these chapters, I will continue to apply the discussed material to how gossip operates within an online context, and I will continue to argue that gossip, while not occurring in the same format online (lacking key characteristics such as privacy, discretion

and exclusion), still serves valuable purposes through the medium of social networking sites and informal electronic communication styles.

While Part II as a whole encompasses the rhetorical functions of gossip, addressing throughout the question of whether gossip still serves as an underlying regulator of norms and values within online social environments, the final two chapters of Part II specifically are interconnected. In Chapter 9, I will be discussing how gossip has direct implications for managing reputations, both online and offline. In Chapter 10, after establishing the importance of reputations and the role of gossip in affecting those reputations, I will be examining how gossip can be used strategically to deter against cheaters.

CHAPTER 6

Interpreting Gossip Rhetorically

Traditionally, gossip has fallen under the category of epideictic rhetoric (e.g. see Ryan, 1996), or the language of praise or blame. My working definition for gossip in this thesis has been the sharing of *evaluative* information about third parties, which extends beyond mere epideictic rhetoric. As a way for a person or a group to learn about and better understand the values of their group, and then to maintain those values in the future, I argue that gossip should be seen not just as “praise and blame,” but as an informal interpretive process related to making judgments about the norms and values of the group.

Aristotle describes three modes of rhetoric (Enos, 1996), which fit appropriately with this understanding of gossip as a facilitator in constructing judgments: epideictic, forensic and deliberative. In this discussion, I have applied these three species of rhetoric to gossip in a unique way to demonstrate my argument that gossip serves to help interpret norms and values within a group.

1. Epideictic discourse, also known as “the language of praise and blame,” is riddled with implications for communicating values and norms. In quoting Aristotle, Donovan Ochs (1995) states: “To praise [or blame] a person is in one respect akin to urging a course of action.” In other words, by evoking a praising or blaming statement, we are making claims as to what is acceptable (praiseworthy) and unacceptable (blameworthy) behavior. In terms of gossip, this may occur first during an initial moment within the conversation. For example, a gossipier approaches an ally and makes an announcement in an evaluative way, praising or blaming

someone, or a situation that has come to pass. Under these circumstances, “...epideictic automatically and powerfully excludes alternative ethical directions” (Ochs, 1995). Epideictic gossip would surface again at the end of the conversation when all decisions have been decided upon. The gossipers signify how they feel about the situation being discussed by exercising epideictic discourse.

Epideictic gossip is in large part about the display. It is as much the *way* in which gossip is communicated, as it is *what* the gossip is communicating that determines the evaluative nature behind the gossip. This is especially true if we understand gossip in a ritualistic context, in which gossip comes to be expected in certain situations, as much for its symbolic value (demonstrating friendship), as it is for its practical value (communicating information). This symbolic value comes not just from gossipy words, but from the accompanying non-verbal communication.

2. Once the gossip subject is proclaimed, it is necessary to deduce how one, or the group, feels about what happened. Was the subject of the gossip a true violation of norms and values? If so, how severe? Or, if the subject of the gossip was something positive, how positive? What happened? Why? When? This type of discourse falls under Aristotle’s second species of rhetoric, *forensic* discourse.

Traditionally, judicial orators employed forensic or “judicial” rhetoric in courts of law, where past events were discussed and determined to be in accordance with the law (just) or not (unjust) (*Silva Rhetoricae*). In a contemporary application, we can see how participants in a gossipy conversation can become lawyers and judges. “Forensic gossip” usually occurs at the second stage of the conversation, after the initial praise or blame has been proclaimed. The epideictic gossip tells what is being talked about, and the forensic gossip involves other listening parties asking

more detailed questions of the speaker to clarify what happened so that they can form a judgment about the topic of conversation. In this way, the gossip becomes the judicial orator, and the listeners become the interpreters of the norms and values being violated.

3. After everyone participating has learned enough about what happened to decide how they feel about the situation, the conversation moves into what Aristotle termed *deliberative* discourse. The questions now turn outward. How will this type of situation be handled in the future? What will the speaker do about the situation at hand?

Looking once again at the traditional application of Aristotle's species of rhetoric, deliberative oratory was the policy-making aspect of discourse. It was through deliberative discourse that legislation affecting the public was determined. Similarly, when gossip enters the deliberative stage, the norms and values that were in question of being violated have been understood, interpreted and agreed upon. Thus, assertions can be made about how these violations will be handled in the future.

Toward the end of the conversation, the rhetoric may now revert back to epideictic language for "closing statements" that either reiterate the initial judgment, or state the new judgment now that the conversation has been worked through.

In this section, I have shown a novel way of using classical rhetoric to understand gossip. Gossip, while indeed being the language of praise and blame, also employs the other forms of rhetoric, forensic and deliberative, in order to interpret norms and values. Without

this interpretation, I argue that gossip may not be effective in facilitating group-serving and self-serving discourse behaviors, and maintaining norms and values.

For example: Two friends, Cindy and Jacklynn go out for dinner to catch up on each other's news. Once alone at their table, Cindy leans slightly forward and lowers her voice. "I've been dying to tell you about Brett, he is such a loser." (The epideictic gossip establishes what is being talked about and how Cindy feels about the subject—blaming Brett.) Jacklynn, surprised by this news, immediately begins asking questions, "Why?! What happened, I thought you two had a great time the other night?" (Forensic discourse serves to gain more details about the subject, and about what norms Brett violated to deserve the blame.) After twenty minutes of back and forth about the comings and goings of Brett and his behavior, the conversation turns to the future. "Well, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to tell his real girlfriend that he took you on a date? I'm never going on a date with baseball players after this..." (Deliberative discourse questions or determines future actions in light of the current situation.) Cindy nods, clearly annoyed by the whole situation. "Yeah, I should have known better, he's really not a nice guy." (And the conversation comes to a conclusion as Cindy turns back to epideictic discourse and indicates that she has not changed her mind about Brett.)

Without understanding how and why a norm or a value may have been violated, understanding the true nature of norms and values can be difficult, as they are not generally talked about formally. Furthermore, without informal evaluative information sharing techniques, such as gossip, understanding the informal, unwritten rules of social interaction, too, would be challenging.

When we view these rhetorical species in an online context, we can see many of the same elements, though rarely do all three occur in conjunction with one another in the ways I have described above. In reality, there are many examples in

which epideictic, forensic and deliberative forms of discourse operate independently of each other, online and offline. On Facebook, for example, Wall posts and comments are usually of the epideictic or the forensic variety, (“You’re the greatest! Miss you!” or “Hey dude, what happened last night?!”) In terms of gossip specifically, the interpretation of gossip in an online environment is challenging, as negative gossip is not so blatantly stated in the public arena. Gossip may occur in a sly comment, a strategic (de-) tagging of a photograph, or strategic (de-) friending. In conversations that occur via “messages” or “chatting,” there would be more opportunity for traditional gossip to occur and to be interpreted using these rhetorical tools. Thus, we can see that traditional forms of discourse do not diminish in an online environment, but rather adapt to serve similar purposes in more instantaneous (and public) ways. Similarly, we can see how cyber-gossiping may be construed differently in an online context, but these new forms may serve to complement and/or supplement face-to-face interactions, where the interpreting of the gossip may occur, as ultimately norms and values must be negotiated in one way or another.

CHAPTER 7

Social Learning

"... it seems imperative (or inevitable?) that what has been learned in the past needs to be reconciled with the present, and the results of that reconciliation need to be passed on to the next generation." - Falk and Harrison (1998)

Social and cultural learning can be seen as one of the primary ways in which gossip contributes to social groups. Whether the recipient of the gossip is a child overhearing an adult conversation or friends swapping stories, “gossip anecdotes” (Baumeister et al., 2004) serve to communicate information about the self and about social or cultural norms and values of a particular group in an informal way. Assuming, as we are, that the gossip is based in truth and is relevant to the audience, much can be learned about situations and group members through this mode of communication.

This section will examine the role of gossip in enabling informal social learning throughout multiple stages of life. Beginning with childhood, we will look at how children overhearing gossip, practicing gossip in play, imitating older role models or being gossiped to directly can develop a mental map of acceptable behaviors within society (including when it is appropriate to gossip). Following, we will discuss how gossip functions into young and mature adulthood. As we develop bonds with family and friends, we not only learn the norms and values of our groups through our experience and our discourse, but we also contribute to and influence the dynamic subculture of which we become apart. Additionally, as shifts and alterations inevitably and frequently occur within groups, (such as changes in alliances, leadership positions, governing norms and values, etc.), our ability to keep track of these changes and adjust our behavior accordingly requires awareness. This is especially

the case in online social environments, as they can become more complex and involve more connections. Similar to how biological anthropologists and human ecologists study human adaptability to understand how humans survive in a given environment over time, I am looking at an aspect of human adaptability in *social* environments, specifically through rhetoric. Humans, it appears, are remarkably flexible in their ability to accommodate changing social environments (for example, moving to a new town, taking a new job or even joining Facebook). Anyone who has attended high school perhaps knows how fast social environments can change and one needs to be “in the know” in order to remain successful (maintain social capital) in that environment. This flexibility is facilitated by the ability for us to learn and transfer information quickly, and this is where informal controls like gossip come into play.

Gossip on the Play Ground

Informally—and formally—structured communication strategies facilitate informal and formal learning processes. Without the ability to communicate abstract ideas in a rapid and informal way, we would be required to communicate only via structured and formal channels. The teaching process for new group members, especially young children, would be lengthy and costly. Rhetorical language such as gossip, however, allows the speaker to refer to the past in order to advocate for future behaviors, which outlines the application of gossip in learning situations. This process is informal, rapid and independent of controls or structure. For example, a parent may say about their neighbors, "Those Robertsons let those kids run wild. I caught little Billy yanking up my tulips yesterday!" Turning to her own child she may say, "It is impolite to ruin other people's gardens, don't let me catch you acting like Billy Robertson."

In this scenario, being able to communicate (gossip) in an informal yet meaningful way to her own son allows the mother to teach her child about appropriate behavior. Imagine the time it would take to cover all of the norms of our culture in a structured classroom environment with a textbook. Through her gossipy statement about the neighbor boy, the mother can communicate to her own son that the behavior was inappropriate and that he should take care to behave otherwise. Thus, we can see how gossip pervades the family (and perhaps other neighbors) and instructs on commonly held norms and values.

This is not to suggest that learning is restricted only to gossip, but I mean to acknowledge that learning is *facilitated* by gossip in this type of informal learning situation. Additionally, as we discussed earlier, communication is much more than just words. Implications and signals in the form of non-verbal communication are paramount in conveying meaning and intention (Mehrabian, 1971). In this example, the mother's disapproval of the neighbor's behavior is conveyed not only by words, but by her body language and tone. This would be hard to re-create in a formal teaching setting that was covering acceptable behavior in a structured format.

Much of the manner in which a child is raised prepares young humans for social, discourse-based interactions. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy discusses the evolution of human parenting in terms of the unmatched emotional, physical and temporal involvement of human mothers and others involved in child rearing in her book, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (2009). Hrdy described how children begin, around the age of four years old, to see the world through the eyes of others. In other words, children begin to be cognizant that others perceive themselves and the world in which they live differently. Hrdy notes that children who have the opportunity to interact with "older, more experienced caretakers" are better at seeing the world as someone else does (Hrdy, 2009: 136). When a child's role models are older, such as a mixed age play group, children

have the opportunity to learn about “status-seeking, posturing, and deceit,” in addition to learning to read emotional queues and understand other concepts, such as generosity and greed. In other words, children with this type of exposure develop what is known as “theory of mind” (137-139) sooner than children without this exposure. This ability to read the mental states of others greatly increase the child’s comprehension of non-verbal communication, which would further the child’s ability to learn and conform to cultural ideals. As Hrdy notes, due to the unique way in which human children are raised—constantly stimulated, challenged, gossiped to and informed by adult caretakers and adult emotions—humans are, by nature, “empathetic and curious about the emotions of others” (294), and therefore any informal means of transmitting social knowledge or social information is desirable. Thus, we can see how a child is prepared from an early age to understand and interpret informal communication.

Much of a child’s learning process also occurs through the imitation of others. Informal conversation or chatter, such as gossip, can be seen as facilitating this imitation process by providing a verbal commentary on the actions being displayed. My parents always told me that I had “big ears” because I was often times eaves-dropping on their grown up conversations, and yet I recognize now in hindsight how much I gained in terms of social awareness and social capital, even as a child “sticking my ears” where I shouldn’t. As children mature and enter into their own social realms at school, on sports teams, in dance classes, at day care, etc., they begin practicing these informal gossiping sessions that they have witnessed in their adult caretakers. We may consider this “play,” and understand it as a way for children to not only learn the guidelines of the communicative genre, but also learn the norms and values of their social world, both their juvenile society, and society at large.

For example, one sees amongst children some unspoken rules that when broken are denounced among their peers, such as being a tattletale, being a teacher's pet or inviting only select individuals to a birthday party. These are the types of behaviors that a child may go home and share with his or her parents, or that a child may gossip to a friend about. As Hrdy describes, even before children can speak, they "appear to monitor what others think of them and care deeply about what others feel and intend" (Hrdy, 2009: 283). In other words, children have a sense, if not a full awareness, even at a young age, of their own reputation and the reputations of others. Thus, they may learn quickly how their actions and informal means of communication can affect their (and others') reputations. By increasing their social awareness, children also learn the norms and values of their social group, and build up skills in informal communication. It is upon this foundation from adolescence that gossip and its online counterpart take shape.

Imitation: A Strategy for Success

Informal evaluative communication, imitation and practice play major roles in a child's social development, but they are not limited to children. As we will see in this section, adults utilize imitation and informal evaluative information sharing throughout their lives in both face-to-face and online settings to learn about their social environments, and learn how to be a contributing and well-accepted member of their social group.

Rendell et al. (2010), in their paper "Why Copy Others? Insights from the Social Learning Strategies Tournament," describe a study they conducted by organizing an international tournament. The winning team was to develop the most effective way to use a combination of social learning and trial-and-error strategies to acquire the most appropriate and effective behaviors in a complex and changing environment. The winning

combination relied nearly exclusively on observing and copying others, and very little on the asocial strategy (trial-and-error) ¹⁶. Their results supported the idea that the ability to learn from others is central to the evolution and persistence of culture. The bottom line to their research states that "it pays to imitate success, except when there is evidence that what has been successful recently is no longer working well" (Rendell et al. 2010).

This approach in many ways mimics what happens in our brains when we find the ideal equation that determines when to take an immediate reward by exercising one behavior, and when to wait and see what others are doing with the possibility of learning a way to earn a bigger reward. This may sound like a modest accomplishment, but the fact that these calculations have evolved to occur within the human brain instantaneously is no small feat. Performing this type of distinction within everyday human interactions is largely dependent upon knowing not only *when* to imitate, but *who* to imitate. Imitating, or imitative social learning, saves time and energy in many ways in contrast to trial-and-error, but it requires a different sort of vigilance, one that allows individuals to make note of changes in the environment and track the successful and unsuccessful behaviors of others (Rendell et al., 2010).

This specific study did not allow participants to communicate with each other, and their definition of "observe" leaves room for a wider application of their findings. Rendell et al.'s definition of "observe" refers to "any form of social learning or copying through which an agent could acquire a behavior performed by another individual, whether by observation of or interaction with that individual" (as cited in Heyes, 1994). I argue that discourse is an integral part of the "interaction," such that adults, like with children, can talk about their experiences and imitate each other more precisely. I believe that the definition would be

¹⁶ The strategy also included a system of more rigorously "discounting" older information in more variable environments. The first place winner, team "discountmachine" also won €10,000.

limited should the agent need to *directly* observe or interact with he or she whom the agent is copying. Rather, an agent sometimes becomes aware of successful and unsuccessful behaviors through word of mouth, or gossip, after the behavior has already occurred.

For example, Deborah Tannen observes that, "hearing people praised for being generous or self-effacing, we get the idea that these things are good to be" (Tannen, 2007: 108). If one hears a co-worker being praised for his promptness in responding to emails, then one can learn that promptness in responding to emails is a desirable attribute in that workplace and can adjust his or her behavior accordingly. Being present during the precise moment of praise is not necessary for this to occur.

Criticisms of the theory of imitation may make the claim that transferred or observed information risks being false or outdated. The same criticisms were acknowledged by the researchers in their study, even with the assumption that the observations were directly in the moment of occurrence. In regards to judging the integrity of the information, the study was limited in that it accounted for neither the nature of bonded social groups, nor language in mitigating these potential errors. It is my argument that gossip may facilitate both and thereby may improve the imitation process.

Later in this discussion, we will explore how comments left on someone's Facebook Wall vary in credibility depending on the commenter's relationship to the profile owner, the content of the message and the degree to which the comment portrays an image of the profile owner that appears contradictory to the owner's displayed personae (Walther et al., 2008). Likewise, there are various social and communicative factors that occur in face-to-face interactions that can contribute to one determining the validity of a certain piece of information shared in gossip encounters.

Gossip is generally shared with people who are closest to us (Wilson et al., 2000), and as such usually occurs within a social group, as opposed to with strangers. The act of

gossiping in and of itself serves as a preliminary determinate as to who is trustworthy and who may be sharing false or made up information (McAndrew et al., 2007), as becoming part of the gossip community requires a sort of trust-earning process and initiation.

Additionally, if gossip is the source of information about a successful behavior, one can determine the integrity of the information simply by knowing the gossipers' reputation and social connections. If the gossipers are known to be "all talk," then perhaps other group members will accept this fact, and take his or her words with a "grain of salt." Even outside closely bonded social groups, the listener can determine the integrity of the information by taking into account what is being said (Has this information been stated from other sources as well? How realistic does it sound considering who is being gossiped about?), and who is saying it (How well does the speaker know the subject? Is the speaker generally full of hot air, or does he or she generally convey accurate information?). Much of the persuasive force of gossip stems from the ethos (or character) of the gossipers. Through these means, knowing the gossipers and knowing the subject, one can verify the integrity of the gossip.

The first half of this chapter has highlighted the importance of imitation as a strategy for social learning, in addition to emphasizing the sometimes-discounted role of informal communication in facilitating social learning, specifically by identifying credible information. The following sections will describe in more depth the importance of gossip in facilitating social learning, and the effects informal social learning on community processes. Once the province of face-to-face communication, these rhetorical functions now also occur online.

The Gossip Cloud

In this section I will present my argument that gossip contributes to a larger store of collective knowledge that I refer to as a *Gossip Cloud*, and that this Gossip Cloud is instrumental in the creation and sustainment of norms and values. Online environments do much to contribute to the presence and visibility of such gossip clouds.

First, gossip has some unique properties that differentiate it from other communication genres, as we discussed in Chapter 3 and 4. For instance, the privacy and exclusiveness of gossip allow for it to include more truthful accounts of *past events*. The informal and evaluative aspects allow for gossipers and their audiences to engage in social encounters that facilitate a better *understanding* of the group's norms and values. These aspects of gossip make it an important contributor to social learning, especially when these past events and the subsequent interpretations of the events can be preserved in the Gossip Cloud.

Second, gossip, by its very nature, targets the most relevant audience. Following the conclusions of Rendell et al.'s study on imitation as a strategy for success, we can see the importance of knowing which individuals are relevant in terms of whom to observe. While it is appropriate to acknowledge that many behaviors trickle down under the influence of popular culture, the most effective people to imitate are related individuals (meaning, related through social connections, not necessarily genetics) within a social group, as those members would be abiding by similar norms and values, and would hold similar expectations (see McAndrew et al., 2007).

We saw earlier how gossip is normally shared with people close to us (Wilson et al., 2000). Additionally, as McAndrew et al. (2007) describe in their paper, "Who do we tell and whom do we tell on? Gossip as strategy for status enhancement," gossip is also most interesting when it is *about* those who are closest to us, either positively or negatively (such

as lovers, friends, rivals and high-ranking individuals). Gossip about these types of people provides valuable information about what is appropriate to imitate, or perhaps provides insight into which behaviors are inappropriate for imitation. In some cases, gossiping itself becomes a behavior to be imitated because it is useful to the group (Wilson et al., 2000). The implication of gossip being shared with people close to us, and gossip being about people close to us is that the opportunity of hearing *relevant* information increases, as gossip is occurring between and about group members who would require similar social expectations.

I would also argue that because gossip is about people close to us, and because it is the behaviors of people closest to us that are the most relevant, it follows that when discourse becomes gossip, it becomes relevant for that group. On the surface this may seem like a chicken and the egg scenario, but I would argue not. There is a filter included in the nature of gossip through which only information that is deemed "worthy" is shared, which could be an indicator of important and useful information in and of itself. The ephemeral nature of gossip in this way is actually useful such that the information being shared remains timely and fitting to current events.

Finally, the information gathered through gossip about and from group members is not only valuable in the moment, it may also be relevant for the future. This point essentially captures the concept of the Gossip Cloud, which has permanence in sustaining group norms. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy describes how "socially transmitted knowledge is cumulative," which results in a very complex set of norms and values governing expectations for group members (2009: 282). Fortunately, due to the effectiveness of informal verbal and non-verbal communication, learning these dynamic norms and values is not difficult. We draw information from others and from their experiences in order to navigate the complexities of our social world. In this way, I am relating gossip to "cloud computing," a term used to describe the phenomenon in which the Internet acts as a virtual

mass storage center for electronic information. Because data in the cloud are not stored in one particular location, the same data can be accessed from any device with Internet access. Similarly, I argue that as gossip is not confined to one set of ears, it can be held collectively in the communal knowledge of the group such that relevant pieces of gossip from the past can be pulled down and recalled in relevant moments in the present—hence the term Gossip Cloud is applicable in this informal mode of communication.

How do these concepts extend to the online environment? We can see the same patterns of evaluative social information exchange and storage on Facebook. When one logs onto Facebook, one is brought immediately to the “Newsfeed” Wall. One can peruse the latest updates of Facebook friends, clicking on people whom one may not have seen or contacted in a while. Eventually, one wanders back to one’s own profile page to see what has changed within one’s personal sphere and most often stays here for the remainder of the Facebook visit. It is here on the profile page that one is more likely to be interacting with members of one’s bonded social groups. As such, relevant information about group members, as discussed above, is most likely to be found on one’s Wall, within one’s photo album where pictures are commented on, or on the Walls and photo albums of close friends. Both of these information sources contribute to the collective information in the Gossip Cloud, just as traditional gossip contributes to the same collective stores.

In terms of the storage of relevant information on Facebook, recall the discussion earlier of romance archives and behavioral residues that linger on one’s Wall (unless intentionally deleted) for as long as the account is in existence. We can see how Facebook, while being an online function that stores electronic information, can also store evaluative, emotional information (something not coded in zeros and ones). Facebook is not only a cyber-log of one’s social capital, but can also be a cyber-log of gossip, tracking changes in

one's status, one's mood, one's downfalls and one's successes for others to observe and from which others can learn.

Have a Chat and Pass the Torch

As many scholars describe, (see Boud and Middleton, 2003; Falk and Harrison, 1998), and as demonstrated above, learning need not necessarily pertain to formal settings where a regurgitation of memorized facts or tasks is an indicator of what has been learned. Rather, informal social learning occurs in all interactions and conversations. Without this learning, groups could not know the unity and cohesiveness that they utilize to function effectively.

Falk and Harrison (1998), in their pilot study of social capital and community learning in a rural Australian town, identify four main areas of community development: socio-cultural, economic, environmental and process. The latter, *process*, is defined by the researchers as "learning activities."

Characteristics of process include the formal aspects of learning, such as through schooling, media and news literature, religious organization, etc., but process can also include the more informal aspects of learning such as imitation, experimental learning, and public and private discourse. This latter point would include gossip; specifically, private, informal and evaluative information sharing especially in regards to social information. Some of the most important lessons from daily life can be learned by "having a little chat" (Falk and Harrison: 1998) with a friend or a neighbor as a way of "passing the torch on to others regarding the forces, processes and activities of [the] community..." In other words, gossip helps in sharing social information, in addition to communicating important community or group updates. In this way, gossip can be seen as playing a large role in

informal community processes, especially in the social arena, where people learn from their, and others', daily experiences and struggles.

Social learning incorporates the past into the present, "weaving as it does the past into the present through analysis of recalled information, and the whole to the future in order to understand and critique future scenarios..." (Falk and Harrison, 1998). We take the outcomes of a past of learning experiences and incorporate them into present experiences, helping to work towards a more successful outcome. Is this not how gossip functions? Gossip pulls information from the cumulative "cloud" of social knowledge about a past event and applies it to the present in everyday conversations. These tidbits of information from the past help us determine how to behave in a given situation. Furthermore, by evoking this knowledge and using it, we can "update" the gossip database through our experiences and "upload" the new information regarding failures or successes back into the Gossip Cloud.

For example, Chris is at the store contemplating what to get for his Valentine, Amy. He decides on gummy bears. In the checkout line, Chris bumps into one of Amy's friends. As Chris shows her what he was going to get for his Valentine, she rolls her eyes, and exclaims, "Chris, everyone knows that girls LOVE chocolate on Valentine's Day! Besides, Amy's *ex* used to give her gummy bears all the time, it was like *their* thing..."

We can see in this scenario that Chris was luckily saved by Amy's friend, who knew not only that most girls like chocolate, but also that gummy bears had once represented something special between Amy and her *ex*, and therefore Chris might be accidentally making a negative association by buying gummy bears. Chris can use both pieces of information in the future. Additionally, other people who heard about Chris almost giving his girlfriend gummy bears will learn that chocolate is usually the way to go on Valentine's Day.

As with this example, the collective knowledge held within a group is gathered and enhanced from the lessons we learn during childhood and in our adult lives, through subtle verbal and non-verbal queues (Mehrabian, 1971), through observations and imitations (Rendell et al., 2010), and from the details about our close associates and enemies (McAndrew et al, 2007). The information and knowledge that we learn from gossip contributes to not only to our understanding our groups' norms and values, but also helps us further understand our roles as group members and to assist us in making decisions for the future. The total of this collective knowledge is retained over time and is accessible from many sources, not just one individual. Once again, we see the Gossip Cloud, both in the online context and in traditional conversations, as the storage repository that serves to monitor and preserve norms and values.

Consider, for example, Bruce Edmonds' reconsideration of the "El Farol Bar" problem (this problem describes how individuals must decide to visit a local bar by using various strategies with the goal of avoiding attending the venue when it is overcrowded). Edmonds shows how past experience and social information, including other people's intentions, as well as other people's past behavior and experiences, may inform on the potential crowdedness of a local bar or restaurant, and thus influence whether one wants to frequent that particular place on a particular evening (Edmonds, 1999). Also contributing to this decision would be gossip-related information, such as whether a particularly attractive person may be attending that night, or whether a friend who is notorious for mooching drinks may be tagging along.

Social Learning Facebook Style

Facebook, while a revolutionary and innovative concept in terms of keeping us in touch with others (Dunbar, 2010), is also revolutionary in terms of social learning. Most

college students in 2011 take for granted the fact that they can hop onto a computer, punch some words into an online search engine and get the answer (or multiple answers) to almost any question they may possibly ask. Likewise, I find that people are taking for granted the ease of gaining access to social information about other people in similar ways. Walther et al. (2008), in “The role of friends' appearance and behavior on evaluations of individuals on Facebook: Are we known by the company we keep?”, found that many of the students involved in the study were in the habit of looking up new acquaintances almost immediately after meeting them, or as soon as they had access to the Internet. This type of behavior, in conjunction with this type of immediate access to social information online, is a novel idea, one that would have been nearly impossible, or at least less informative, in pre-SNS days. Such access increases social awareness about who are good individuals to learn from, and who are good individuals to learn about.

In terms of learning norms and values through gossip, this is also facilitated online. For example, the comments on left Facebook are strategically composed because public posts can impact appearances and reputations. Information that influences reputations is also valuable in terms of social learning, as others reading and interpreting evaluative comments left on Facebook are likely to learn something about norms and values from someone else's experience. For example, take this conversation (via comments) posted under a picture on Facebook featuring a group of people sitting in a café. One young woman (presumably Person A) is wearing a very distinctive floral themed shirt with rolled up sleeves:

Person A: HAHA GRANDMA TOP :)

Person A: and why did i always do that to the sleeves.

Person B: yeah dude...looks like it was made out of old curtains HAHA!

Person A: i am so going to like post this top to you. i hate you ... its in my suitcase and looks lonely and i want to wear it ... it beckons me, but your voice tortures me also. grrrr. haha.

We get the impression, through this friendly bantering, that the floral shirt was not an excellent fashion choice in the opinion of Person B. Obviously, this conversation is not private, as any one of Person A's or Person B's friends can see the picture (as many as one thousand, if not more, people) and read the comments, so while the privacy element of gossip is diminished, it is certainly evaluative and informal. An outside observer reading the comments and looking at the picture may gain insights into fashion "dos" and "do nots" by interpreting the conversation with the accompanying picture, in addition to gaining information about the people leaving the comments. Their word choice and cyber-demeanor may indicate something about their personalities, which, as we saw in the section on imitation as a strategy for social learning, is important when deciding who to imitate. Furthermore, comments such as these play an important role in learning what is praise-worthy or blame-worthy material. Perhaps the floral shirt was not an excellent choice, or perhaps it was very stylish. By interpreting the comments left under the photograph, observers can witness what is praise-worthy and blame-worthy and, in theory, adjust their behavior accordingly. Another popular example of this method of learning is seen in senior pictures and wedding announcement photos, both of which are commonly posted on Facebook. People leave endearing comments under their friends' photos both as a way of showing support, and as a way of indicating what they like. Leaving a comment with positively valenced information is like casting a vote for something that you think is good about a picture, a couple or a situation.

Throughout this section, we have seen how gossip assists in learning the norms and values of groups, meanwhile helping to assure that the information obtained is relevant, up-to-date and honest. Of the potential social learning errors that were brought to light in Rendell et al.'s (2010) tournament—outdated or false information—gossip can be seen as a mediating factor to those issues within human social groups, as gossip can be analyzed based on relevant past experiences. We have also looked at how gossip facilitates learning within communities and groups by enabling a Gossip Cloud, which provides group members access to relevant social information. Finally, we have looked how the “comment” tool on Facebook enables viewers to learn relevant information about their social world by analyzing what other people think about the image, the behavior displayed in the image, or the behavior described in the post. We have seen with these latter topics how gossip continues to play a role as an informal strategy to facilitate social learning online, despite the adaptations, which are necessary for cyber-gossip to operate within online environments.

CHAPTER 8

Gossip, Social Bonding and Group Cohesion

As we saw in Chapter 5, “Gossiping in Groups,” gossip and other forms of informal discourse play important rhetorical roles in maintaining the cohesion between tightly bonded social groups. We will see in this chapter how gossip serves to contribute both to the group as well as to the individual in terms of building group cohesion and forming social bonds.

This chapter will include a discussion about the importance of the effective use of language as a rhetorical tool for social bonding, such as in small talk encounters, in what Malinowski termed “phatic communion”¹⁷ and in what Deborah Tannen refers to as “rapport-talk” (2007: 76). I will also highlight the effective use of language in terms of exchanging information and the implications of that exchange on relationships on social networking sites.

From Chapter 5, Robin Dunbar’s argument for the utility of gossip in forming bonds through social grooming describes the essence of this second rhetorical function of gossip. To recall Dunbar’s argument in more detail, Dunbar describes how gossip serves as a group bonding mechanism and is thus comparable to grooming, in that the “feel-good” effects of both grooming and gossiping contribute to group solidarity. Affectionate, physical contact releases endorphins, which allow animals to establish loyalties, build bonds and smooth over conflicts. Dunbar has argued that gossip can serve similar purposes within human social groups by bringing people together, allowing vexed members a cathartic release of tension and gently smoothing over conflicts. Such uses of rhetoric build bonds between the

¹⁷ A term used to describe “a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski, 1923: 478).

gossiper and the confidantes. The advantage to gossiping over grooming (for humans) is that humans live in much larger social groups than primates, and gossip doesn't require direct contact. It would be impossible for you to physically *groom* every single friend you have on Facebook. The human capability to communicate via structured language allows for the ability to "gossip groom" more people simultaneously and across great distances, thereby allowing humans to occupy larger social groups (Dunbar, 2004).

Small Talk With Large Impacts

Walking on the university quad a couple weeks ago, I crossed paths with an old acquaintance. We stood off to the side of the path for a few moments exchanging pleasantries. While our lives no longer intersect and our social groups no longer overlap, we still found material worthy of meaningful conversation, ("How's your semester going? How is your family? How is your dog?") We chatted for no more than three minutes before she continued on her way. After the conversation, which was lively and full of smiles, I felt slightly elated that such a small encounter could create such a connection. This example, demonstrates how "small talk" can have large impacts.

While acknowledging that this argument is neither intended to define all aims of group-serving social discourse, nor is it implying that the participants in social discourse are consciously pursuing specific aims (Tracy, 1991), one can nonetheless see how there are various semi-conscious aims involved in everyday conversations (Coupland et al., 1992; Tracy and Coupland, 1990). For example, phatic communion, or "communion achieved through speech" (Laver, 1975), refers to a genre of language that may appear at first glance to be the unimportant, trivial aspects of a conversation. Despite being relegated to these "marginal phases of interaction" (Laver, 1975), phatic communion has been theorized to

serve important social bonding functions. Included in the phatic communion genre could be jokes, small talk, chit-chat, gossip, etc., but the purpose of the conversations are largely to create social unions and establish companionship (Coupland et al., 1992). In its original application, Malinowski concluded that the conveyance of meaning was not the primary purpose of phatic communion (1925: 478). And yet, as discussed by Tracy and Coupland (1990), from *Multiple Goals in Discourse*, multiple conversational goals exist for all types of discourse. Thus, many examples can be imagined or realized in which the communication can be equally phatic and convey meaning. In this discussion, I am arguing that gossip has both phatic (relational) and information-driven goals. John Laver (1975), in “Communicative functions of phatic communion,” emphasizes how phatic communion goes beyond a “mere exchanging of words” as Malinowski had originally described, and includes important, though perhaps subtle, clues as to the meaning of the comment and the status of the relationship between the speaker and the listener. In other words, the phatic phase of a conversation can communicate to each participant where they stand in regards to the conversation. We will see in the next section how this pattern also occurs online.

In the previous chapter on social learning, I described how young humans develop curiosity about those around them, which contributes to a child’s self-awareness and understanding of place within a social environment (Hrdy, 2009: 283). Similarly, Laver describes the phatic stages of a conversation as the moments when participants express curiosity in another person’s “social identity and momentary state of mind.” In this way, the participants can establish their places within the social interaction. Understanding this type of “role structure” within the conversation is a precedential step to recognizing the genre of communication that will be occurring, and subsequently will allow participants to cooperate within that determined genre (Bergmann, 1987; Laver, 1975).

In a similar way, the choice of details disclosed and the amount of elaboration on the topic, in addition to body language, can inform the listener of their significance to the speaker. Such interactions establish where two individuals stand in regards to their relationship within the conversation. This is true not only for the phatic phase of a conversation, but also for other phases or genres of communication as well. If the relationship between the two speakers is amiable, this sentiment will be communicated through the content and manner of the discourse. In these ways—taking an interest in others and choice of details—we can see how phatic communion is a rhetorical tool through which social bonds can be demonstrated, and also how information can be gained from the interaction.

If we look at how gossip might fit in this scenario, a gossipy conversation is, as with most conversations, opened with phatic communion. Depending on the content of the gossip, gossip itself may remain in the phatic realm while participants in a conversation work through the information that reveal their attitudes about the subject matter (what I identified earlier as epideictic discourse). We can see, too, how these opening moments of a conversation, the small talk and the subtle queues involved in the phatic phase, can be seen as part of the "grooming" aspects of gossip. Robert Putnam describes how "trustworthiness *lubricates* social life" (2001: 135), it feels good when someone trusts you, confides in you or simply feels comfortable enough speaking with you about their frustrations. The reciprocity of this trust builds up bonds between people and contributes to the cohesion of groups. I argue that gossip, provides a framework for this trust and reciprocity to occur. Perhaps these details are taken for granted, but removing the phaticity from everyday conversations would be highly detrimental to friendships. Which raises the question, does phatic communion exist in online social environments?

Merely Exchanging Words...Online

Some researchers have claimed that phatic communion has become a dominant form of communication in online social environments, such as on social networking sites (Miller, 2008). I argue a somewhat contrary point. While much of the discourse that occurs online is indeed phatic, such as friendly Wall posts that appear to be left for purely social bonding purposes, there are also other conversational goals at play. Miller argues that SNS have “flattened” communication, such that discourse is limited to the phatic domain of conversation and therefore lacks dialogue and information (Miller, 2008). Contrarily, I argue that while SNS may appear to be composed of deflated discourse, there is in fact more to online communication than just text.

It is important to recall two points discussed earlier in this paper. First, that communication is neither exclusively direct (meaning communication is not reliant purely on spoken or written content) nor unambiguous (meaning that communication may be implied). Non-verbal communication (Mehrabian, 1971) and implicature (Grice, 1975) play important roles in determining the meaning of communication. Secondly, conversations that occur on Facebook are often supplements and complements to ongoing conversations. If we were to take the fragments of conversation that occur online at face value, we would miss the larger conversations of which the fragments may be a part. Face-to-face and online worlds are connected to each other. In understanding these two dimensions, we can see how communication on Facebook is not being flattened, necessarily, but rather must be interpreted as a supplement or complement to face-to-face conversations.

While I agree with Miller that “these new media objects seem to articulate [the processes of phatic culture] particularly well,” I feel that it would be a mistake to see the discourse occurring online as purely phatic messages, especially on SNS, while an examination of the interaction as a whole is imperative to understanding the consequences

of the information, and the more pervasive effects of that information. Thus, in an online context, we see that: a) phatic communion is not always confined to being uninformative, and b) online discourse is not exclusively phatic.

To claim that phatic communion is uninformative would be to take Malinowski at his word, and would be to assume that phatic communion is merely an exchange of words. And yet, as we have seen with our discussion on phatic communion thus far, we can see how phatic communion gives important information in regards to positionality, or where two people stand both in the conversation and in their relationship. Furthermore, I have argued that phatic communion characterizes the initial phase of epideictic discourse, such that the speaker can reveal his or her attitudes in regards to the subject, which is not only informative in terms of understanding what the conversation may be about, but also in terms of defining the confines of the conversation by indicating the emotional valence of the topic. In online environments, we can see too how the words on the page may appear to be uninformative, but they in fact communicate information concerning the positionality of conversation participants, as well as the directionality of the conversation, even if that conversation may take place through a different medium of conversation at a later time.

For example, gossip on social networking sites often takes the form of phatic communion, such as comments left under pictures posted on Facebook (e.g. a picture from high school prom with a comment written underneath saying, “You are so beautiful! Did you get your hair done? Who was your date?”) These comments are almost always positively valenced, but are not without informative content. We can see by analyzing the various parts of the discourse how this comment describes the relationship between the subject and the commenter, as well as the possibilities for the future of the conversation. The first half of this comment, “You are so beautiful,” indicates that the relationship

between the two participants in this moment is “solidary,”¹⁸ or consisting of a community of interests, which indicates that the participants are of equal social standing relative to each other (Laver, 1975). The second and third parts of the comment, “Did you get your hair done? Who was your date?” could be seen as indicative of the closeness of the relationship. If the amount of information shared between two people is an indicator of closeness, then we can see how the commenter, in not knowing whether the subject of the photo got her hair done, or with whom she went to the prom, indicates that the two are not very close friends, or at least they do not share information about their daily lives on a regular basis. In other words, to get one’s hair done or not before prom is generally a conversation that occurs between friends before the event, if not directly, then through gossip circulating within the group. The commenter in this situation was apparently not part of either.

Let us now turn to the second point (b) listed above, in regards to online discourse not being exclusively phatic. While phatic communion is becoming more prevalent online, and thus social cohesion can be seen as pervading online, I argue that phatic communion is not dominating online communication exclusively. Similar to the previous point about phatic communion being informative, the act of exchanging phatic comments on SNS has other implications besides social bonding. We discussed earlier that studying communicative genres such as gossip online is difficult because the information is neither private, nor solely online. Thus, the valence of the information has a tendency to be positively biased. That being said, leaving phatic comments on, for example, someone’s Facebook Wall, can be strategic means of affecting reputations, especially if the comment is

¹⁸ John Laver describes how the relative social status of two individuals determines their relative positionality, which in turn can be seen as determining what “category choices” for the conversation are appropriate. For example, in a conversation between two individuals of equal social standing (student to student), the conversation may be more or less unrestricted, whereas in nonsolidary relationship (student and professor), as “other-oriented” questions may be inappropriate or overly intrusive (Laver, 1975). Thus, the phatic communion between individuals of varying relative social standing will be determined in part by that positionality, which in turn may govern the direction of the conversation.

evaluative (see Chapter 9). We can see, then, how online discourse is not always exclusively phatic online, but has accomplish other aims as well.

Phatic communion does serve a rhetorical function by contributing to social bonding online. However, I have argued that examining phatic communion both in face-to-face interactions as well as online provides a good example of how the aims of discourse are not limited to one purpose, but rather can simultaneously contribute to equally important goals. In the case of phatic communion specifically, we can see how informal conversations not only contribute to creating ties of union, but can also be a means by which participants establish the positionality of their relationship and the directionality of their conversation. We will see in the next section how gossip, in conjunction with phatic communion, enhances the positionality aspect of the conversation by demonstrating to the audience their “worthiness” from hearing gossip.

Worth Your Weight In Gossip

Thus far we have examined how different facets of discourse are important for social bonding, but there is more to the story in terms of gossip. For example, we will see how trust and valuable information are exchanged during a gossipy conversation in a way similar to an economic exchange. In gossipy situations, this economy of exchange is a primary component to how gossip serves to build social bonds. Additionally, we will discuss the distinction made by Deborah Tannen between “rapport-talk” and “report-talk” (2007: 76) and examine the implications of exchanging those types of information.

Let us revisit for a moment one of the dilemmas discussed earlier in regards to gossip primarily serving the group or self. While gossip can be seen as a group-serving mechanism, we see many examples in this discussion of gossip serving to rhetorically

establish social bonds and provide benefits on the individual level. Phatic gossip, for example is predominately self-serving as it builds individual bonds. This behavior is explained in part by individuals being largely motivated by their own personal needs in terms of friendships. In turn, friendships—close bonds between individuals—are characterized by the reciprocity of trust, affection and service. Such characteristics are also essential on the group level. We can therefore see how group-serving and self-serving aims are not so far removed. For the purpose of the following discussion, however, I am going to focus on self-serving gossip.

Values of fairness and equality seep down into our everyday behaviors. Children learn early on the sting of betrayal if one friend shows more attention to another child, or if a parent mistakenly gives one child more attention than his or her sibling. There will be demands, and maybe tears, insisting that the treatment be shared equally. Having learned these values at a young age, adult humans react with similarly strong emotion when they feel they are being treated unfairly. When it comes to high-value exchanges, such as money or time, people are very sensitive to issues of fairness. If this were not the case, our society would not be frustrated by the income gaps and disproportionate cost of food for low-income families, or by the time spent waiting in the doctor's office. Deborah Tannen (2007: 106-107) alludes to a similar value system for gossip exchange. Friendships are based in reciprocity, the reciprocity of time, attention, text messages, Facebook posts, buying rounds, babysitting duty, hosting poker night, driving to the slopes, shoulders to cry on and even gossip. The exchange of the latter, Tannen argues, establishes social contracts and signifies to group members how important they are to each other. In short, in some ways we are worth our weight in gossip when it comes to being close friends with others. Gossiping in this sense builds what we have been referring to throughout this paper as *social capital*, both in the sense of preserving friendships, but also in terms of exchanging social information.

Tannen describes how the telling of secrets (what she is referring to as gossip) not only provides “evidence of friendship,” but also “creates” friendship. This type of “rapport-talk,”¹⁹ or private language characterizing informal conversation, is described in the same way as phatic communion was described, as a way “of establishing connections and negotiating relationships” (Tannen, 2007: 77). Gossip, in particular, is considered to be more costly information, and as such can be seen as being more impactful in terms of establishing connections and negotiating positionality. Despite the positive aspects of gossip that I have been arguing for throughout this paper, gossip can be composed of delicate or destructive information, especially when gossip affects reputations, as will be discussed in Chapter 9. It is the risk of exchanging gossip that increases its value. Therefore, if someone shares an important piece of gossip with their friend, it is a gesture of trust and an indicator of the importance of the friend and the friendship. The rhetoric of gossip is instrumentally being used to indicate and create friendship.

If we look at the exchange of valuable information on Facebook, we will see more evidence of phatic communion than of evaluative information sharing about third parties. We must understand, however, that the framework changes online. For example, the exchange of gossip in this public environment may be very harmful to the gossipier. Therefore, we can see how the switch from private to public domain affects what types of information become valuable. In an online context, public phatic communion may be equally as valuable as private gossip.

For example, phatic behaviors, such as public displays of affection or the sharing of positively valenced comments on Facebook are valuable in two ways. First, the comment, like the exchange of gossip, is an indication of friendship. The recipient of the comment,

¹⁹ “Rapport-talk” is observed by Tannen (2007: 76) as the contrast to “report-talk,” which describes public speaking.

upon reading the comment, will be aware that the commenter was thinking of them, and that the commenter considers the recipient a friend worthy of attention. Additionally, Walther et al. (2008) also found that positive comments left on one's Facebook Wall "increased the target's physical attractiveness." Similarly, a person who has comments posted on their Wall from many different people may appear to have more friends, or more social capital. Therefore, I am arguing that Facebook comments may be valuable in terms of both individual feel-good effects, as well as positive implications for one's reputation. As such, the exchange of Facebook comments can be seen as means of building social connections and social capital.

We have thus far looked at how gossip, as a form of rhetoric, contributes to social bonding and social learning. In examining social learning through gossip, we saw how informal means of communication can be useful ways of instructing group members about norms and values. Furthermore, because gossip is stored in the collective knowledge of the group members, what I refer to as the Gossip Cloud, lessons learned from the past can be invoked at relevant moments in the future.

In terms of social bonding, we saw how phatic communion and rapport-talk serve to create unions between individuals participating in a conversation. I also argued that gossip is a unique case because gossip can be both phatic and informative simultaneously when a group member shares a piece of valuable information with someone else. I showed how both patterns stay true online, despite the bias towards positively valenced gossip. In the next chapter we will see how gossip affects reputations, which in turn facilitates cooperation within groups, as well as being instrumental in the policing of cheaters.

CHAPTER 9

Reputations

Gossip offers a means by which individuals can adopt roles outside of their formal position, say in a work or classroom environment. Gossip offers an opportunity for a person to speak their mind and express their views. Both behaviors impact the gossipers' reputation, which may run counter to his or her professional or public identity. Similar to gossip, people can manage their reputations on Facebook, which provides the opportunity for people to demonstrate multiple facets of themselves through online discourse and photographs. For example, recall the section from Chapter 2 in which we looked at underlife behaviors and how they are facilitated online.

In this section, I will be elaborating on this idea, not necessarily in terms of the underlife, but in terms of a person influencing his or her own reputation. I will be focusing on two primary roles of reputations in social living. First, I will be showing the impacts of the strategic use of rhetoric on indirect reputation management, which can be used to achieve a beneficial outcome, such as job promotions. Then, I will discuss how striving to maintain a positive reputation within a group, which can motivate good behavior, benefits the individual and the group as a whole, such as in societies in which members are dependent upon each other for resources and aid. It is important to note that while much research agrees with the general assumption that the harming of reputations has negative consequences, few researchers discuss *how* these negative consequences come about and the role that gossip plays.

A willingness to cooperate in the future is based in part on how cooperative a partner was in the past. This application is similar to the social learning discussion in

which trusting the integrity of the information from the speaker was a product of the speaker's reputation. Trust was also evoked in the social bonding discussion, as trust “lubricates” social interactions and facilitates the creation of bonds.

One’s reputation is based on past behavior, which affects a future interaction, which will inevitably become a past behavior, which will affect another future interaction. These events, which determine one’s reputation, are communicated rhetorically through communicative genres such as gossip. In our social system, reputations are important because not only do they affect cooperation, but they have significant effects on one’s access to and the allocation of both social resources (information, friends, partners, lovers, etc.) and physical resources (a good dentist, job promotions, invitations to parties, etc.) (Hess and Hagen, 2001; Sugiyama and Sugiyama, 2003). Just as a child will not share his Little Debbie with the class bully, the Debbie-Downer of the office will not be the first up for promotion.

Additionally, while gossip aids in cooperation, it remains to be said that cooperation is a useful strategy even among strangers. Milinski et al. (2002) show in their study of cooperation with public goods that cooperation pays off over selfishness, especially when others can track the reputations of their anonymous teammates. They conclude that reputations are very important for cooperation in the public sector because they deter individuals who are looking to cooperate from accidentally investing in individuals who have not contributed in the past. This study did not include communication between players, but I would argue that gossip in this type of situation would contribute to player awareness and would further increase the likelihood and efficiency of cooperation.

Anthropologically speaking there is an evolutionary explanation for harvesting good reputations. If resources provided by others are determined by reputations, then being able to manipulate one’s own reputation (or other’s reputations) for one’s own benefit (Hess and

Hagen, 2001) would be advantageous. Reputations do not simply manifest spontaneously. Rather, they are manipulated at the hand of the owner and shaped by others.

It is my argument that reputations are mediated and/or manipulated indirectly. It is also my argument that gossip largely contributes to the development of reputations. Hess's research, focusing mainly on alliances and coalitions, deals closely with individuals directly manipulating their own reputations, such as a scenario in which having more allies allows for one to rhetorically transfer or receive more information via more vectors. In other words, if you have more friends, there are more people to spread positive gossip about you and give you information. This idea could even extend to the reason why employers want a list of references with a job application. It's a way to find out more about a potential employee before hiring.

Lawerence Sugiyama and Michelle Sugiyama discuss in their analysis, "Social roles, prestige, and health risk: Social niche specialization as a risk-buffering strategy," how certain psychological traits and behaviors have been selected that motivate people to value other individuals who have been generous with their time and the yields of their work so that in the future those behaviors can be reciprocated when needed (Sugiyama and Sugiyama, 2003). Additionally, while these traits of valuing generous behavior are beneficial in and of themselves in terms maintaining group cohesion, *being* valued as a helpful and fair person is also something that would manifest as a desirable trait within groups. Not only are people motivated to appreciate others, but they are motivated to maintain a valuable reputation. Sugiyama and Sugiyama (2003) propose that reputations motivate one to *want* to be valued in a group by performing valued acts within a community, and as a result one continues to have access to the resources of the group in the future.

In short, one manipulates one's own reputation (consciously or not) through one's actions. This describes an indirect approach to reputation management, because reputations are formed through actions and not through direct disclosure. For example, when meeting a new colleague, if a person simply says "I am an excellent worker," this statement does not necessarily influence his or her reputation, except for perhaps reputing him or her as being arrogant. Contrarily, when working with a new colleague, if the same person demonstrates good work ethic, then he or she may earn the reputation of being a good worker. Following my argument, that reputations are almost always managed indirectly, one can see how the rhetoric plays a large part in this reputation management. One cannot force others to think a certain way, but one can choose their own behavior, which in turn may influence the way they are spoken about, which may affect their reputation in the eyes of another.

Sugiyama and Sugiyama's research on hunter-gather societies also brings to light an important adaptation, which pertains to equal-sharing behaviors. Those who share equally will be valued in the group. For example, a hunter makes a kill. The meat from the kill is divided equally amongst the group of hunters, who then return to their camp and share the meat with their families. This process of equal sharing is advantageous to the fitness of the hunter, his fellow hunters, their families and the community as a whole. Not only does the hunter *maintain* his reputation by sharing his meat, but his fairness will be stored in the Gossip Cloud, and assuming reciprocity is operating in the group, his generosity will be reciprocated on the next hunt when he may not be as successful. Furthermore, these types of sharing behaviors strengthen group trust and bonds.

While Sugiyama and Sugiyama do not discuss gossip specifically in their article, it can be assumed that if any one member does not participate in equal or generous sharing, others will gossip about this lack of cooperation and the cheater will face some sort of

retribution from the group. Therefore, the motivation to abide by the group's norms and values, and thereby harvest good reputations, results in behaviors that not only maintain group solidarity, but also allow for successful social living that benefits both the individual and the group. Furthermore, we can see gossip as a "good" to be exchanged, similar to the meat of the kill. Within groups, the more valuable or juicy the piece of gossip shared, the more the gossipers have demonstrated their commitment to the recipient and have given a sign of the closeness between the two individuals (Merry, 1997; Tannen, 2007), who is likewise indebted to the gossipers in the future to display an equal commitment to the relationship. In this situation we see how multiple rhetorical functions of gossip overlap in that exchange of gossip serves not only to enforce group cohesion, as discussed previously, but also to enhance cooperation.

"I'm so much cooler online": Reputations and Facebook

We discussed in the previous section the importance of gossiping in managing one's reputation and the positive implications associated with maintaining a good reputation. With Facebook, it becomes quite easy to paint the picture of an ideal self when you have nearly complete control over what others can see or not see, in addition to the liberty of self-enhancement also enabled through these devices. (No doubt this phenomenon inspired the song titled "I'm so much cooler online," by country singer Brad Paisley.) If Facebook profiles are effectively reflecting personalities and reputations (Gosling et al. 2007), then one may question whether there is still a need for devices such as gossip in managing reputations. The actual findings of Gosling et al. (2007) were that Facebook profiles accurately portray users' personalities, but that users themselves are not necessarily aware of how they are perceived by others. Similarly, as a profile owner may not be aware of how they are

perceived by others, their best efforts may actually result in them earning a bad reputation unbeknownst to the profile owner. For example, I can spend hours and hours attempting to create an idealized version of myself on Facebook. However, the efforts that I put towards making an idealized version of myself will not necessarily be effectual in creating a good reputation. We can see, then, a discrepancy between how one displays oneself and how one is actually perceived. Profile owners may include personal information that they feel will enhance their reputation on Facebook, but that may in fact have a counter effect, or no effect, on their reputation, depending, of course, on which group's norms and values the information is being measured against.

This discrepancy between how one displays oneself online and how one is actually perceived by others is one of the many ways in which informal communication can function online to influence individual reputations. For example, I mentioned earlier that I once worked for a research and publishing firm that taught onsite courses to organizations undergoing major inter-company changes. One of the instructors, Jerry, with whom I was working at the time, told a story during the class that I find relevant to this point, not in terms of Facebook specifically, but in terms of online impression management. He described how he used to write short, hasty emails to his colleagues back at the office in Colorado, giving updates on the progress of the course, asking for last minute materials, etc. To his dismay, he kept receiving frustrated responses to all of his emails. His colleagues back at the office felt that he was being rude, hostile or angry. He realized that his online persona, communicated through emails, was not in line with the true personality that he wished to project, and was therefore having a negative effect on how his emails were received. In response to this problem, he began ending every email with a smile face (e.g. ☺) to convey that he was neither being rude, nor was he mad.

We can see how this situation is limited in communicating tone and body language. As is often the case with technological devices such as a cell phones and computers, especially on social networking sites where writing space is limited, messages must be communicated in a more telegraphic manner, and therefore must rely more on an assumed code or other assumptions, as is the case with emoticons, which we discussed in Chapter 3. One must quickly learn the “cryptic” language used by others in order to not only “cooperate” within the conversation, as we saw in Chapter 3, but also to simply understand the message and its meaning accurately.

Similar to Jerry’s dilemma, Facebook messages must be communicated carefully to avoid unintended confusion. In the absence non-verbal communication, one’s manner of communicating is all that the recipients of the information have to interpret meaning. On Facebook, cyber-gossip may be useful in mitigating this problem. If you are reading a profile owner’s personal information published on his or her profile, you may develop certain impressions of that person. If you then read what other people have said about the profile owner (via comments, posts, likes, etc.) this may influence or change the impression that you had received from seeing the published information alone.

We can see from this section that while online impression management may appear to be as simple as creating the idealized version of the self through strategic information disclosure, in reality online impressions are as vulnerable to interpretation and outside influence as face-to-face impressions. Furthermore, we saw with the example of the curt emails how information disclosed online has implications for one’s reputation. Failure to carefully navigate those channels may result in the earning of a bad reputation. Thus, what Facebook impressions gain through freedom of disclosure (something not so easily done in face-to-face interactions without appearing conceited), they lack in emotional empathy,

which is often communicate via non-verbal communication. Thus empathy must be translated such that it can be communicated rhetorically online.

The question then arises, since impressions influence reputations, and reputations are influenced by gossip, how effectively can a Facebook user artificially manage the impressions that others have of him or her through their own postings?

Managing Reputations Online

In response to the question posed above, this section will continue the discussion of reputations mediated by gossip online and will look more into the indirect ways in which cyber-gossip can influence reputations.

In many cases, the information that one posts, either on his or her own Wall, or on the Walls of others, can serve to manage the impression that others have of him or her. However, this is not always the end of the story. Reputations are not static entities. They are constantly being re-negotiated as we interact with others throughout our lives. Therefore, we can see how a person may artificially manage their own reputations on Facebook, but their reputation is also subject to the postings from others. Walther et al., (2008) found that information posted by others on a profile owner's wall is more interesting and valuable to viewers who are trying to learn something about the profile owner. In other words, information posted by others is more readily believed than information posted by the profile owner. Presenting false information on a Wall post poses a risk to the post-er, for there is a high likelihood of being discovered. Being known as someone who posts false information, or who spreads false information, would be damaging to the post-er's reputation. Therefore, information posted by others is more likely to be true. This is posed in contrast to self-elaboration on the part of the profile owner, who may display an

exaggerated version of what they consider to be their best qualities. For example, a person who loves football may create an online persona of themselves in which they are depicted as being an All-Star football player. If a friend posts something on the football lover's Wall, such as "Dude, our team totally rocked the flag-football game last night! Don't sweat that last fumble..." an observer of the Facebook page may be more inclined to believe that the football lover is less talented at football than his profile page leads one to believe.

Therefore, if we believe this argument to be true, it follows that the degree to which the information posted by others contrasts with what the profile owner says about himself or herself can increase the post-er's credibility—with the exception of jokes, tricks and teasing, but even these little comments have rhetorical functions and can be informative to a viewer. We can see therefore how comments and posts on Facebook, at the hand of the profile owner and from others, serve to check and balance each other and thereby prevent a profile owner from over idealizing themselves, which may violate norms and values associated with Facebook use.

While the profile owner has the ability to delete certain comments, this is only done when the profile owner feels that the comment is out of line with the impression he or she is trying to portray through Facebook. While there is not much research on this particular point, research on privacy functions on Facebook in general suggest that people are more inclined to be less discrete. In regards to comments left on one's Wall, it is very unlikely for that comment to be deleted—as a) That would raise suspicion from anyone who has already read the comment (deleting a comment may add validity to the comment), b) the author who wrote it gets the satisfaction of knowing that they may have touched on a sensitive area, which may give them the upper hand, especially if the relationship is not particularly amiable, and c) even if the statement appears to be contradictory to the profile owner's ideal impression, this contradiction may actually serve to reinforce the impression

that the owner is going for. The apparent contradiction may be what makes this profile owner feel and appear unique, which may be the impression that he or she desires for himself or herself.

Contradictory Reputations: When Bad is Good, and Good is Bad

This idea of earning a “desirably contradictory” reputation defines a new rhetorical function to gossip. In assessing norms and values, we must keep in mind that individuals occupy multiple social groups simultaneously and these groups may hold conflicting norms and values. Therefore, negative gossip from one group may be worthy of positive gossip in another group.

Here is an example: I used to regularly attend the Catholic ministry for my university. The group held bible studies, volunteer opportunities and organized alternative social events that did not involve sex, drugs or alcohol. We had a relatively tight-knit group of people with similar values. Within this ministry, however, was a subgroup of people who also loved to party on weekends, exhibiting a contradicting set of norms and values in comparison to the church group. As a result, this group would go out and party hard on Saturday night, and then come to church the following morning, hung-over and feeling guilty.

In this situation, these people were displaying behaviors that appeared to be contradictory, and yet the partying and the church-going both continued, implying that the “dual lifestyles” that they were living was actually an intentional combination of two different sets of norms and values, which they used to create what they felt was a unique and desirable impression of themselves. The dual lives of the partying church-goers would have remained mostly hidden if it were not for the circulation of valenced gossip either

through face-to-face interactions, or through Facebook displays (photos, comments, etc). As the gossip did not deter the contradicting behavior, we can imagine how even negative gossip can contribute to one's self-identity and one's reputation in some instances. This is not always the case, however, as attempting to generalize one trend within social behavior is rarely a successful endeavor. In the next example, we will see how negative gossip does not always positively enhance one's reputation online.

As previously mentioned, very little negatively valenced gossip appears on Facebook. Even if gossip is negative on Facebook, it is not always perceived as such. For example, Walther et al. (2008) posted two different comments (one positive and one negative) on hypothetical men and women's Facebook pages, and then showed the pages with the comments to study participants. They found that there appears to be a sexual double standard on Facebook in regards to promiscuity and drinking. The study participants gave a high attractiveness rating to men who had negative comments posted on their Wall (describing the individual as drinking too much and acting irresponsibly), whereas in the case of women, negative comments posted on their Walls lowered their attractiveness (Walther et al., 2008).

Thus, we see that on one hand, negative gossip on Facebook may be seen as a positive or desirable thing to have if either one is male, or one desires to display contradictory information. However, the research also shows that profile users may not be aware of how they appear to others viewing their Facebook profile. As a result, depending on the content of their Facebook page, individuals may be seen as more or less desirable depending on their gender and their behavior.

So the question remains, does gossip still maintain norms and values on Facebook? On one hand, we can see how gossip may define norms and values differently for men and women. Also, negative gossip may define the values within one social group, which may

then be in contrast to another social group's values. I would argue that the answer becomes increasingly complex as people belong to multiple social groups. Gossip becomes less effective at managing reputations when people are abiding by two distinct sets of norms and values and this would be true online and offline. Furthermore, gossip as a policing function for violators of norms and values (see Chapter 10) becomes less effective, as it becomes clear that individuals with contradicting norms and values appear to be immune to negative effects from negatively valenced gossip of one group. It would appear that we are seeing a trend in which the movement towards technological advancement in communication leads to a decrease in the effectiveness of informal control strategies such as gossip in some cases. These occurrences of contradicting or distinct reputations online demonstrates how gossip does not always, or necessarily, fill the same roles online as traditional gossip does in face-to-face interactions.

CHAPTER 10

Cooperation and Policing Cheaters

Gossip plays important roles in managing reputations, which can enhance cooperation. Researcher Ralf D. Sommerfeld and his colleagues from the University of Vienna developed a computer game to test the influence of gossip on teamwork. Their research is founded on the phenomenon discussed in Chapter 5, in which humans tend to congregate in relatively large groups and therefore cannot directly observe each other's interactions (as Dunbar theorized), and yet they still manage to maintain high levels of cooperation. This empirical study designed a game to test the assumption that gossip acts as a means of transmitting social information that can then compensate for low levels of direct observation. Their results show that gossip did, in fact, affect behavior (Sommerfeld et al., 2007). Their findings include:

- 1) *Gossip about cooperative individuals is more positive than gossip about uncooperative individuals,*
- 2) *Gossip comments transmit social information successfully, and*
- 3) *Cooperation levels are higher when people encounter positive, compared with negative, gossip.*

Cooperation can exist at high levels in large groups due to the effects of indirect observations, such as through gossip. Consequently, I am arguing that when used to enhance group efficiency, gossip becomes a group-serving tool.

I believe that this theory of third-party observations remains applicable online. As Facebook can be seen as a supplement to face-to-face interactions, online SNS simply

provide another avenue through which people can exchange pertinent social information. One may face a potential bias for positive information exchanged on Facebook, as we discussed in earlier sections, but this can still inform a viewer about the good qualities of a potential partner. Furthermore, tools such as the chat function and the email messages allow more privacy, and thus may be an avenue for communicating valuable, evaluative and valenced information if necessary.

The reality of our social world does not allow us to know the limits of our interactions with others. There is almost always potential that one might need to cooperate with someone again in the future. As a result, maintaining a good reputation by cooperating ensures that each participant will be willing to cooperate in the future. Gossip serves to aid in cooperation, which is essential for group unity and efficiency, meanwhile also benefiting the individual by building up positive reputations and ensuring future cooperation partners.

Life would be so simple if we could just conclude that cooperating leads to further cooperating. Unfortunately this is not always the case. The following section will discuss the implications for cheaters and the ways in which gossip works to combat cheaters within groups through their reputations.

Deterring Cheaters: Passive Aggression Against Cheaters

Gossip can be seen as having many important functions, including the one that has earned gossip a questionable reputation. To not acknowledge the darker, more destructive side to gossip would be doing the discussion an injustice. In regards to mechanisms for mediating the outcome between cheaters and cooperating individuals, as well as cheaters and cooperating groups, Magnus Enquist, Professor of Ethology at Stockholm

University, and his colleague, Olof Leimar, in “The evolution of cooperation in mobile organisms,” propose that gossip serves as one way to not only monitor others’ behavior, but also to *guard* against cheaters (Enquist and Leimar, 1993). For the purpose of this discussion, the term “cheater” is referring to an individual who exploits the cooperative efforts of others. For example, a cheater may refer to someone who always borrows money but never returns it, or someone who likes hearing gossip about others, but never reciprocates. In this section, I will argue that gossip can increase the cost of exploiting a group or an individual within a group through inter-group gossiping, and thereby deter cheaters.

Though cooperation has proven to be more successful in the long run (Dunbar, 1994; Enquist, 1993; Milinski et al., 2002), cooperating individuals are “vulnerable to invasion by non-cooperating (defecting) individuals” (Enquist and Leimar, 1993). The resulting assumption raises the proposition that if cooperation increases the risk of being exploited, then there must be mechanisms in place to regulate cheaters.

Applied to social cooperation, we have described throughout this paper how social groups provide various social resources. Cheaters move between groups, exploiting those resources while giving nothing back. Therefore, informal social regulators, such as gossip exist to increase the “cost” of staying with a particular social group by spreading gossip (negative evaluative information) about the cheater’s behavior to the group. Once group members learn of the cheater’s bad reputation, they will be disinclined to cooperate; therefore, the cheater can no longer exploit the group. Thus, the cooperating group decreases the amount that they are exploited by forcing the cheater to find another group *or* change his or her behavior and start cooperating.

Gossip can operate in a couple ways as a regulating mechanism of cheaters, which are demonstrated by the following two examples of what I have termed “reportive

gossiping.” In the first example, two people interact. One cheats and the “burn-victim” reports to others about the behavior of the cheater, thereby damaging his or her reputation. Other members of the cooperating group will then be less willing to work with the cheater, resulting in a decrease in benefit and/or increase in cost for the cheater, and the cheater will be “forced” to leave the group or change his or her behavior.

The second example consists of two people interacting who are observed by a third party. If the third party witnesses cheating, they will report the behavior to others, thereby damaging the cheater’s reputation. From there, the same pattern occurs as with the first-hand gossiping such that the costs of staying (or cheating) become too high for the cheater, as no one in the group will be willing to cooperate.

Checking-In and Checking-Up

Whether indirectly or directly, gossip allows for important information to be transferred and the cheater can be deterred, or at the very least, detected. For example, Sally Engle Merry described how in the inner city neighborhoods of her field work location, the police or victims of theft often used gossip to trace the crime back to the perpetrator (Merry, 1997). This sort of checking-in and checking-up in many ways is facilitated online, as information can be shared faster and can reach a broader audience (Gurak, 2001: 29-46).

This checking-in and checking-up need not be restricted to formal laws, but can work for violations of informal norms and values as well. Bowe (2010) describes how one can observe cyber-gossip through photographs in a policing fashion, as in instances such as partner infidelity. If one sees one’s boyfriend or girlfriend “hanging all over” another woman or man in a photograph posted on Facebook, or if one notices a high frequency of

correspondences between their significant other and another woman or man, this may be a mechanism through which one can be informed of their partner's unfaithfulness.

This online checking-up is not always motivated by negative feelings, however. We saw earlier in this discussion the findings of Walther et al (2008) in regards to gaining information and impressions of new acquaintances soon after meeting. They describe how their study participants looked up the new friends on Facebook soon after meeting in search of common friends or interests. This may seem off-putting in contrast to some ten years ago when such impressions and information were restricted to conversations and shared experiences with the new acquaintance. On the one hand, this feels like a privacy violation, but on the other, privacy settings on Facebook control what others are allowed to see. Privacy settings allow for the user to control what is seen and disclosed, which, as we saw earlier, may very well be carefully calculated information. Therefore, whether one is looking into a potential cooperation partner, a significant other or just a new friend, Facebook is an accessible way to find different types of information about people, about their behavior and about their reputations.

Informational Warfare

The process of deterring cheaters outlined in the above sections seems simple enough, but while strategies such as what I refer to as “reportive gossiping,” would increase the cost of staying (or cheating) in a group and hinder the effectiveness of the cheater, these strategies may not be sufficient to deter a particularly stubborn cheater. Hess and Hagen (2001, 2008) make a claim that people, women in particular, use gossip as a form of aggression. They use the term “informational warfare” to describe gossiping that attempts to physically strike at enemies or cheaters through their reputations. Recall Chapter 9,

where I described how reputations are important because they have significant effects on one's access to and the allocation of both social and physical resources. Additionally, reputations are based on past behavior, reputations can be managed personally or from outside parties, and reputation management affects both the individual and the group. To be clear, physically assaulting a cheater is not in the best interest of a cooperator (apart from perhaps some cathartic release of built up frustration). Being reputed as having an aggressive temperament does not necessarily bode well when it comes to social and reproductive success in a social environment among humans. But for cheaters to take advantage of others unopposed is not beneficial to the group or to the individual, either. As a result, Hess and Hagen (2001) have proposed that gossip can be used to negatively hinder a cheater's success by directly harming his or her reputation. Aggressing cheaters through the infliction of negative reputations can play a big role in one's social success and largely determine one's access to resources (Hess and Hagen, 2001).

This argument works in support of the theory that argues for gossip contributing to self-serving aims. The theory of informational warfare hypothesizes that one can use gossip and information to obstruct cheaters or enemies by harming their reputations. Gossip as informational warfare, therefore, acts as a social regulator and relies on the idea that one will be held accountable for his or her actions and behaviors through *fear* or danger of earning a bad reputation. As Merry (1997) discusses in her analysis of gossip, earning a bad reputation has negative consequences not only on individuals, but also on their families or close social affiliations. Thus, acting to preserve a good reputation can be seen as favoring gossip as a group-serving mechanism, with subsequent implications for the individual.

Informational Warfare Online

Informational warfare is one area in which the deterrence against cheaters has arguably become even more effective online than through face-to-face interactions. We discussed earlier how displays of negative comments and posts on Facebooks can be detrimental to the post-er's reputation. However, this does not mean that aggression does not occur online. Contrary to some of the other rhetorical functions of gossip, information warfare is facilitated by the lack of privacy characteristic of online social environments. Furthermore, informational warfare is facilitated by the speed at which the deterrence can take effect.

Just as spoken language can be used instrumentally to have pervasive effects on social interactions, so too can Facebook tools be used strategically to affect relationships. "Cyber informational warfare" still uses strategic rhetoric to deter against cheaters.

While generally speaking, actions such as tagging others or oneself in a photograph, "liking" a status, commenting on a photograph, or leaving comments or posts on others' Walls are considered amiable behaviors or as gestures of friendship that help to reinforce social bonds, these tools can also be used as passive forms of aggression against an enemy, a rival or a cheater. What makes these tools so appealing is that one can strategically use them to act in a hostile way while maintaining the appearance of a positive online persona.

A very common example that I have observed is the strategic tagging and de-tagging of photos involving significant others with the intention of sending signals to ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends, (reinforcing the "ex" in *ex-boyfriend* or *ex-girlfriend*), in cases where there is still tension over the break up. For example, let us pretend that Gina has just entered into a relationship with John, who has recently broken up with his ex-girlfriend. Gina, noticing that John has many pictures on his Facebook profile of him and his ex, may take some pictures of her and John and upload them as soon as possible, so that she can tag

herself and John in a picture together, thus sending a message to John's ex that she is John's new significant other. This type of move may be motivated simply by the desire to show off the new relationship, but undertones of the desire to evoke jealousy, or the need to declare boundaries may also be at work.

Another strategy for deterring against rivals or cheaters may be a strategic post on someone's Wall, or sending email messages behind someone's back, such that alliances of coalition can have the appearance of forming publically. For example, if John's ex is bitter about John entering into a new relationship, she may post messages on his Wall to make Gina jealous, or she may engage in online discourse with John's friends to give the appearance of alliances being formed against Gina.

Finally, for many Facebook users, the process of de-friending (otherwise referred to as "unfriending") is comparable to spring-cleaning. Throughout the year one may collect friends, some of whom one doesn't know (or doesn't know anymore) and at some point one may feel the need to "sweep out" one's network. Many people face anxiety over such tidying up. A *New York Times* article captures the sentiment well in saying, "As social networking becomes ubiquitous, people with an otherwise steady grip on social etiquette find themselves flummoxed by questions about "unfriending" people: how to do it, when to do it and how to get away with it quietly" (Quenqua, 2009). It's true that because of the way friendships have been socially constructed, nothing short of a blow up argument and termination of relationship merits the de-friending of someone in offline life. These constructs are often adopted by online personas.

However, there is another side to the de-friending scenario. "De-friending" is arguably one of the most vindictive behaviors on Facebook and can be seen as a severe means of passive aggressive action. This differs greatly from the "spring cleaning" in that the intentional de-friending of someone is a singular and individually focused act. For

example, if John feels that his ex-girlfriend becomes excessively clingy as demonstrated through multiple attempts at establishing contact through Facebook, he may decide to “de-friend” her as means of permanently severing the relationship.

Informational warfare online is not a perfect comparison with traditional informational warfare as described by Hess and Hagen. For one, the “speed, reach, anonymity and interactivity” (Gurak, 2001: 29-46) of online communication is so fast and far far-reaching, that the strategic aiming at particular reputations becomes diluted, and therefore less effectual. Furthermore, negatively gossiping in a public space can be detrimental to the gossiper. I am arguing, therefore that online informational warfare, or perhaps more appropriately, “Facebook warfare,” does not affect the reputation of the target directly, but the sting of the cyber-gossip is effective at deterring cheaters all the same.

Summary

In Part II, we have discussed five different aspects of gossip and their rhetorical functions. First, in Chapter 6, through the application of classical rhetoric I have shaped the ways in which gossip goes beyond the language of praise and blame to facilitate the interpretation of a group's norms and values using epideictic, forensic and deliberative discourse. This understanding of gossip as a rhetorical means of informally navigating the complexities of our social world describes a key function of gossip: interpreting social norms and values. Furthermore, I explained how gossip can still serve interpretive roles in online environments by complementing face-to-face interactions where further interpretation may occur.

In Chapter 7, I described another primary rhetorical function of gossip as a tool to facilitate the learning of norms and values. I outlined how children and adults both learn norms and value through informal communication channels. A key aspect of this social learning comes from strategies of imitation, which are regulated through gossip such that imitators can decipher trustworthy information and thereby not mistakenly copy an inappropriate or ineffective behavior. I also introduced the concept of the "Gossip Cloud" when describing how gossip is stored in the collective knowledge of the group, such that old gossip can be revoked when necessary to teach a lesson or instruct on a behavior.

Chapter 8 was a discussion about the role of gossip in terms of solidifying group cohesion and facilitating group bonding. While Robin Dunbar gives a pretty high number for the number of close relationship a person has on average throughout their lifetime, 150 relationships is still too many to manage without language as a mediator. It was within this context that we discussed the use of phatic communion and rapport talk in smoothing the progressive creating of social bonds. Phatic gossip, in addition to facilitating group cohesion,

also provides important information about the positionality of the relationship and the direction of the conversation.

In Chapter 9, I showed the role of gossip in affecting reputations and how reputations are important for social success, or the building and maintaining of social capital. This chapter included a thorough discussion of how Facebook tools can affect reputations. I described how gossip becomes a less effectual tool in some cases in terms of enforcing norms and values or defining group membership when individuals are visibly members of multiple social groups, each with a different set of norms and values.

In Chapter 10, I discussed the strategic use of gossip in affecting others' reputations as a means of policing and deterring cheaters. This concept is reliant upon an understanding that the group is a mutually cooperative entity that is based on trust and reciprocity. This cooperation is mediated by gossip as gossip helps cooperators know who is a trustworthy partner. When a cheater enters a group, or begins to exploit the cooperative efforts of others, group members can use gossip to affect the reputations of the cheater such that no cooperator will cooperate with the cheater.

Conclusion

One cannot say for certain whether Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, had any idea of the potential that his creation would inspire, but I think one can say with relative certainty that Facebook has changed the world, both in the ways in which people and organizations communicate, and the ways in which people and organizations remain interconnected. Would the revolution in Tunisia have happened without Facebook? Perhaps, but it would likely not have happened in 28 days.

As I am writing this section, February 11, 2011, former President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, resigned his 30-year dictatorship after an upsurge of protests, sparked by a Facebook and You Tube campaign. Through the uncensored, cyber-spread of positively valenced, evaluative information about local heroes such as the Tunisian fruit seller, and the contrasting, negatively valenced, evaluative information being spread about corrupt dictators, such as Mubark, previously marginalized youth have found new ways to organize and get their voices heard through social networking sites. Mubark was felled not by gossip itself, but by what gossip became—a back channel, collective outcry for freedom. In short, gossip has effectively made the jump to cyber-space.

Key Findings

As gossip adapts to new technological formats, it impacts social norms and values within our society. My goal was to show how gossip continues to have those impacts on social norms and values in the world of social networking, even if the traditional forms of gossip have needed to adapt to the new environment. I discovered that cyber-gossip not only affects these norms and values, but it serves as an informal control strategy and maintains group cohesion. Specifically, by becoming a multidimensional communication strategy, gossip has adapted to the online environment and thereby continues to fulfill some of its traditional roles, which contrasts to some other commonly held views of communication on social networking sites.

One of the key findings of this thesis is that gossip exists neither exclusively online nor exclusively offline, rather gossip online is complementary and supplementary to gossip in face-to-face interactions. Therefore, the rhetorical functions of traditional face-to-face gossip remain effective in online environments. Additionally, a second key finding is that privacy (or lack of privacy) is an important driver for the adaptive features of gossip in

online environments. For example, the absence of privacy online changes the manner in which people communicate online, the ways in which people learn about norms and values, and the degree to which reputations can be influenced and used to control cheaters.

In Part I of this thesis I examined how the Cooperation Principle and the nature of communicative genres in general contribute to the establishment of gossip as a communicative genre. I presented eight characteristics of gossip that specifically characterize this mode of communication. Furthermore, I demonstrated how gossip, while adopting some altered characteristics, still exists as a communicative genre online. This first part helped to lay the foundation for an analysis in Part II of the rhetorical functions of gossip.

In Part II of this thesis I examined how gossip operates in specific ways to perform various social functions. I demonstrated that the interpretation of norms and values continues in online environments, despite the lack of conversational flow, meaning that conversations occurring on Facebook are often not continuous in the moment, but rather are punctuated conversational spurts of information, that when taken together can compose epideictic and forensic rhetoric. In terms of social learning, I introduced the concept of the Gossip Cloud which likens gossip to the mass storage of information online and serves as a source for social learning. The Gossip Cloud refers to the idea that a bonded group retains past gossip within its collective knowledge, such that old gossip can be recalled in relevant moments in the future. I derived this concept from an Internet cloud because of the unique way in which gossip is not “stored” in one particular place. Rather, pieces of gossip are known by various members of the group, such that when group members come together, they can combine their knowledge. Online, we saw that gossip was still kept in a cloud like medium, but due to the nature of the Internet and behavioral residues on Facebook,

collective knowledge is no longer limited to closely bonded social groups. A broader user base can access the Gossip Cloud online.

I also demonstrated how gossip, as phatic communion, serves to create bonds between conversation participants, meanwhile helping participants to negotiate their relational standing and the direction of the conversation. I argued that gossip has a relational focus, in which gossip can build trust and encourage reciprocity; while at the same time gossip has information-driven goals, such that gossip can reinforce social bonds while communicating social norms and values. The same patterns hold true online. Communication online is not exclusively phatic, despite appearances of superficiality to online discourse, especially on SNS. On the contrary, one must take into account, when analyzing online discourse, that the words that appear on the screen are not the end of the story. Because discourse in general is reliant largely on non-verbal communication, and because Facebook messages, posts and comments are largely supplemental to face-to-face interactions, one cannot conclude, based solely on what is immediately visible, whether cyber-gossip or online discourse in general, is exclusively phatic, for that would be removing the discourse from its larger context.

While all the rhetorical functions of gossip are interconnected to some degree, I specifically argued that reputations can be mediated by gossip, meaning that gossip pertains to others' behavior, which in turn impacts their reputation. As a result, I demonstrated how the strategic use of language (rhetoric) is an important aspect to managing reputations, and thereby influences others' reputation. In this way, gossip serves as an informal social control mechanism. Group members who are found to violate norms and values are gossiped about, which harms their reputations as a form of punishment, or as a means of encouraging remorse and change in behavior.

When extended to an online context, we have seen how the internet adds a unique dimension to the manner in which reputations are created, managed and altered. Facebook profiles readily display various qualities and characteristics about a person, both through the information presented by the profile owner, and through comments left by others. Unique to the online environment is the exposition of multiple personas, something that in face-to-face interactions can only be seen over years of interacting with a person. Most people in American culture know their friends within particular contexts, and often times those social contexts never overlap. Online however, the multiple “underlife” characteristics of a person are simultaneously on public display. As a result, we can see more explicitly how individuals co-exist in multiple groups with differing norms and values. From this understanding, I have concluded that in terms of informal social control, cyber-gossip is less effective than traditional gossip as an informal means of control in those cases where a person harbors multiple sets of norms and values simultaneously, making him or her more impervious to negative gossip. However, because gossip co-exists online and offline, the face-to-face counterpart to online discourse may mediate the effectiveness of online social control.

Future Directions

While Robert Putnam’s recount of the decline of social interaction within society is convincing and frightening, I feel that we need not despair. In reality, social interaction is not declining, the future of friendship is not threatened and gossip is not in danger of being silenced. Our existence as humans has never occurred in a vacuum, nor has our species existed in a state of social static. Rather, as our population grows and technology changes, with it changes human sociality. Gossip has adapted and made the leap to our new world of social networking and therefore, it is up to us to learn, imitate and adapt such that we can

continue to live, despite the developments of technology, lives that are fruitful in friendship and companionship.

This thesis has opened up many new possibilities for future research:

- For example, the concept of the Gossip Cloud that was introduced in this thesis could be examined more closely both online and in traditional social groups. How accurate is the Gossip Cloud in relaying past information? Who utilizes the Gossip Cloud? What are the underlying mechanisms that allow the Gossip Cloud to operate?
- Additionally, a most useful study would be one that looked closely at group dynamics on Facebook. I have argued that groups do exist in online social environments, but a narrower statistical analysis of Facebook, one that accounted for age demographics, frequency of use, frequency of postings and comments, and trends in the directionality of online discourse would further enhance the overall understand of how bonded and bridged groups operate online.
- Finally, in light of many current events happening in our global community, it would be interesting to explore further, and more specifically, the impacts that social networking sites have had on political movements worldwide. Malcolm Gladwell published an article for *The New Yorker* in October of 2010 titled “Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted.” He made the claim that due to the weak ties of people connected on Facebook and other social networking sites, online activism will never be true, high-risk activism. But is this really true? I wonder, had Gladwell written this article six months later, if he would have made a different argument. It would appear that SNS are doing nothing but helping non-violent

national revolutions and political movements worldwide (recall the discussion of Tunisia and Egypt in this thesis). Because the nature of non-violent protests are rapidly changing due to the influence of social media, I feel that a more thorough understanding of the role that social networking sites are playing in global political movements would be a timely and intriguing study.

Broader Relevance

In speaking with a colleague who was reviewing a draft of this paper, I noticed that in an unrelated conversation, he began incorporating some of the concepts that I have addressed in this thesis. All of a sudden, he had a vocabulary to describe and understand a pattern of behaviors that were occurring within his work place. He recognized how gossip, as an informal communication channel affecting norms and values, was running counter to the formal communication channels, and was contradicting some pre-established norms. I am not going to form an opinion about whether this is a positive or a negative occurrence within the work place, but I wish to draw attention to the fact that once gossip is identified as having impactful effects on a group of people abiding by similar norms and values, all of a sudden our understanding of our day-to-day interactions, and our understanding of how norms and values are constructed, evolves into something greater.

In this moment of historical technological change, it becomes clear that we can no longer dismiss gossip as the idle chatter of old maids sipping tea. An understanding of the flows and channels of communication behaviors allows us to deconstruct the way in which humans communicate in general, and subsequently allows us to better understand one another, where people are coming from, how people learn, what people care about and how best to deal with others.

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