

Gossip has long been misunderstood. Here's how it can help your work and social life

July 15 2022, by Kathryn Waddington



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Gossip gets a bad rap—from tabloids full of salacious celebrity gossip, to the badly behaved teens of television programs like *Gossip Girl*. But while it might get dismissed or reported as an unsubstantiated rumor, gossip is a key part of [politics](#) and the way the world works.

Gossipy women are over-represented in popular images of gossip. An informal analysis of 100 Google images of gossip revealed 62% were of women only, 7% were men only, and 31% showed men and women gossiping. This reinforces the popular and enduring myth that men don't gossip, but [research shows](#) that men and women engage in the same amount of gossiping activity.

Gossip can be traced back to the origins of language. Evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar even argues that language evolved to [enable people to gossip](#). From its earliest form to today, gossip has been a way to pass on socially useful information about who you could (and couldn't) trust, who was a free rider, and who talked bullshit.

This type of talk produced social cohesion and alleviated conflict. During the Middle Ages the word gossip (originally *godsibb* meaning "sponsor at baptism/godparent" in Old English) evolved to describe women who supported other [women during childbirth](#). Over time and after a number of changes to spelling, the term gossip took on the meaning of a familiar acquaintance, a friend, and later to ["anyone engaging in familiar or idle talk"](#). Today, the term is used and interpreted in a number of ways, as a verb "to gossip," a noun "the gossip" or even to refer to a specific person who engages in gossipy behavior—"a gossip."

There was no negative meaning attached to gossip until around the time of the [European witch hunts](#) in the 16th to 18th centuries. Gossip was a catalyst for accusations of witchcraft and sorcery, leading to inhumane use of medieval [instruments of torture](#). The "scold's bridle" was designed to punish and prevent women from speaking. Thus, gossip's negative reputation and stereotype as "women's talk" began.

Paradoxically, at the same time, gossip as men's talk spread throughout the 17th and 18th centuries in English [coffee houses](#). As exclusive resorts of the educated and rich, they were places where learned men

(there is little evidence of women in coffee houses, unless as servants) and their [male students](#) came to demonstrate their wit and intellectual talents. Here, the myth that women gossip but men have serious conversations was born.

My research into [gossip and organizations](#) shatters the illusion that gossip is trivial or dangerous [women's](#) talk. When interviewing men about their experience of gossip at work, they often begin by saying "I'm not one to gossip, but . . .," and then go on at length to talk about how they use gossip strategically and politically.

I have encountered many euphemisms for gossip such as "shop talk," "post-meeting debriefing" and "corridor conversations." Men seem to feel more comfortable with these terms. Rather than asking "what's the gossip?" on return from holiday, they are more likely to ask "what's been going on?" The intention behind the question is the same, but the latter may soften the shame associated with being a gossip. Similarly, words I have heard used to describe people who gossip are "they are a good listener" and have "good people skills."

Gossip at work

There is a wealth of material calling for gossip to be [eliminated in the workplace](#), and [books](#) advocating spiritual reasons for resisting gossip.

Popular stereotypes of gossip overemphasize the negative judgements made in gossip, but it can be associated with [compassion](#), empathy and noticing suffering. Gossip is a way of expressing emotions, both positive and negative, a way of "letting off steam" and an emotional reaction to perceived social injustice.

There are also times when gossip is an expression of concern about unethical or unprofessional behavior—for instance when there is

["common knowledge"](#) about sexual abuse, but nobody speaks up. When the topic of gossip is about poor practice in organizations, it can act as an [early warning signal](#) that should be heeded, rather than ignored or disregarded.

I am not saying that all gossip is good. There are times when gossip can do harm to the [reputation](#) of people and organizations. [Negative gossip](#) is a form of bullying, which is detrimental to people's well-being. The decision to gossip—or not—is always an ethical decision.

A new understanding

Gossip has undergone a slow rehabilitation since I first began researching and writing about it over 25 years ago. As my recent book [Gossip, Organization and Work](#) shows, gossip is being taken seriously as a topic of research in [communication](#) and business.

Globally, the [#MeToo](#) movement has changed perceptions of gossip, as has the rise of ["speak up cultures"](#) and the creation of psychologically safe environments where truth can be told without fear of recrimination. [Whistleblowing](#) is vital for exposing misconduct or hidden threats and maintaining an open society. The focus has now shifted from gossip as a problem itself, to gossip as a way to represent the "problem behind the problem"—exposing structural issues that have been swept under the rug.

The pandemic has also shone a spotlight on the benefits of gossip. Almost overnight, lockdowns removed opportunities for the casual conversations that constitute [gossip](#)—conversations in the coffee queue, and before or after meetings. As many people return to the office, they may realize how important these little [moments of gossip](#) are to social bonds and cooperation.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Gossip has long been misunderstood. Here's how it can help your work and social life (2022, July 15) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-gossip-misunderstood-social-life.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.