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BBC World Service
Hot Gossip Part 2
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Last 9:23 minutes recorded

The evolutionary benefit of gossiping

Psychologist Eric Anderson of Northeastern University in Boston says, "One of the ways that gossip could potentially help is that it is a type of instructive learning. We don't have to experience somebody being bad or somebody cheating us. Simply knowing that they did it to somebody else is enough to change how we interact with them. In that way it can be a lot more beneficial in that we can learn a lot more about people and change our behaviour to people in the world to our own advantage and without being taken advantage of by other people."

The challenge of modern technologies

In the days of our evolutionary history when these systems were appearing, gossip consisted of what you said to one person or what someone said to you. Nowadays, in social media you can get this same kind of information in vast quantities from large numbers of people and you can disseminate gossip yourself much more widely. I wonder how the system copes with that. How do our brains, which were designed in one context, respond to this new challenge?

Psychologist Eric Anderson says that we don't really know, "Psychologists are just starting to understand how these new changing technologies are influencing our minds."

The danger of gossiping in social media: cyber-bullying

Any such unconscious influence is worrisome. The more so when you reflect on the cruelty of some of the gossip in today's social media.

Quotes from young people: "People don't realise today how much young people struggle"; "Everyone says oh I want that body I want that face, and you know we all say to each other don't judge a book by its cover, but we all do"; "A major one is cyber-bullying because no one takes it as serious as other bullying."

The advent of social media and its speed and its penetration has changed the impact of gossiping, according to Lord Sacks: "Well it has changed it hugely because it has given rise to this new phenomenon of cyber bullying and that is gossip on a macro scale. And we have had some very highly publicised cases in Britain and America of teenagers committing suicide as a result. It is a really, really tragic thing. And when you are on the receiving end of this, this is terrifying and I think the number of kids that it has badly affected now means that we have to take this quite seriously."

How can we prevent cyber-bullying?

We can't dis-invent the internet; we can't stop any kind of electronic communication.

Lord Sacks: "No, I think you try and invent a new ethic of speech. You know in the end new social phenomena tend to be unregulated and the end of result is very good things happen that you never expected and very bad things happen. And we are just struggling towards an ethic; whether we'll ever get there I don't know. But I think so. Every new social phenomenon generates its own new ethic."

The danger of being too strict with use of social media

Bill Thompson, Technology expert and new media pioneer: "It seems to me that we are applying a very different set of criteria to words that have been captured on social media than we are to those words in other contexts. Those boundaries are so hard to draw, I fear that we are inadvertently putting down some very hard lines about what you can and can't safely say online. I don't think we are going to like those lines in five years' time."

Why is gossip different on social media?

Evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar; “The threat of social media lies in the failure to recognise that social media are different ... I think the problem with social media is that we think we are still hanging over the garden fence. Psychologically we still think we’re in that kind of conversational context ... It’s quite clear, because most of the posts are directed to individuals or a couple of people rather than to the wider network that’s based there.”

Can we learn to make more mature use of social media?

Evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar; “It depends on whether these predispositions are something that are purely learnt, or something that are some way in-built.”

Bill Thompson: “These tools are designed to tap into our desire for social gratification. Facebook works because we constantly check it; we want to know what people are saying about us. We are open to both positive and negative messages. So it may well be that the design of the social media tools that in particular young people are using leaves them more vulnerable than they would otherwise be to a message that if it came through a different channel would not affect them in the same way. The fact is that through the tens of thousands of years of human evolution we have been and remain social animals. We know how to get on in groups. We know how to bump up against one another. We know how to create close-knit societies and communities. Perhaps it’s just that at the moment the glass of the screen of the smartphone and the laptop gets in the way of remembering that there’s another human being on the other side of the glass.”

What would be a new ethic for gossip in social media? How should we interact with gossip in social media?

Philosopher Julian Baggini favours an austere approach to negative gossip, a simple self-denying ordinance: just say “no”. “We are not completely helpless with this. Not everyone is equally fascinated by celebrities. A lot of the way we control ourselves in these situations is not in the particular moment. It is about what we expose ourselves to. Just like Ulysses tied himself to the mast so that when he went past the Sirens he wasn’t lured, you can either choose to subscribe to celebrity magazines and go to celebrity websites and therefore find yourself with this temptation which is irresistible, or you can’t. You’ll find that you’ll still be tempted from time to time, but only when it happens to pop-up on other things. We are not just passive victims, but does that mean that we are going to gossip less in general? I don’t think so. Maybe we’ll start gossiping more about what is going on in the office or on the street. And that is probably a good thing.

Stop here – Tuesday 27 January – save the rest for 10 February.

Are we too confident about the resilience of personal over-the-fence gossip in the face of burgeoning quantities of the more vacuous celebrity kind?

Social Psychologist Nick Emler: "People do seem to be spending rather less time talking with friends, with acquaintances, with neighbours, about themselves and each other. There is a really worrying piece of evidence come out of some research in the United States in which a very simple question was asked in a large scale survey and the question was, *"Do you have somebody with whom you can talk about important matters?"* Twenty years ago ten percent of respondents couldn't name a single person; now that has gone up to 25 percent. What that suggests is that this whole engagement in the social life of the people around us is declining. I think there are all kinds of reasons why this happening, but one of them is that our attention is being increasingly captured by gossip about people who appear to be famous, important, interesting and having much more dramatic colourful lives than we do and our neighbours do."

What are the consequences for society if this trend for dependence on celebrity gossip continues?

Nick Emler: "I think you would find decline in participation in community public life and political life. You would find increasing social isolation and increasing desperation in people's lives because one of the things that gossip does as it works effectively is that it keeps the community informed about its members, about what's going on, what's troubling them, what's difficult for them, and allows us to provide support."

It would be a pretty weird society wouldn't it if virtually everyone in the street knew that David Beckham had just eaten a prawn sandwich and no one knew that Mrs Jones at number 3 had just suffered a bereavement or was about to have a baby ...

Nick Emler: "Absolutely I think it would be a terribly sad society. Not one I would want to live in. Not one I would hope to live in. But I can see that there is a worrying trend towards increasing social isolation. So I would certainly recommend one keeps guard and carries on gossiping because ultimately it is fundamental to what we are, what makes us human, and what makes us happy and healthy."