

The Importance of Gossip Across Societies: Correlations With Institutionalization

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Abstract

This article presents a cross-cultural analysis that explores the relationship between the importance of gossip and institutionalization. It is reasoned that as institutionalization increases, so does the difficulty of attaining direct information about events and people that would be consequential for any given individual. As a result, gossip should increase with institutionalization, and complexity generally. This general hypothesis is tested against data from a sample of recent and historical societies. The analysis finds support for the hypothesis and also explores the relationship between gossip and gender autonomy. The results are discussed in terms of understanding gossip as a strategy for attaining information when direct information gathering is inhibited by one's social structural circumstances. The article closes with a discussion of possible implications for contemporary societies.

Keywords

gossip, institutionalization, complexity, gender autonomy, information

“Did you hear what happened at the Board of Trustees meeting? Listen to this . . .” “You know what I heard our neighbor did the other day? You won’t

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believe it . . . ” “Janine said she heard that to get tickets we have to go to the downtown office.” Such is the stuff of everyday interaction. Moments when we get the “inside dope”, “the lowdown”, “the dirt” help us develop our knowledge of the social world that surrounds us. Common enough, one would think. This article, however, is inspired partly by the idea that the importance of second and third hand information may vary across societies. Specifically, the article uses coded ethnographic data to test the hypothesis that gossip is more important in more urbanized, more stratified, and more institutionalized societies.

To begin, we should remind ourselves what gossip is, and thus, how it might be conceived by the ethnographers and coders: Gossip can be defined as talking “behind the back” of the person being discussed, or talking about news of others that is “none of your business.”¹

We hypothesize that in more complex societies, there will be more decisions that affect you, which you are separated from, and it may be that the only or the best way to gain information about those decisions and the decision makers will be to talk about them, “behind their backs.” Gossip may increase in importance as society becomes more complex, stratified, and organizationally specialized.

There is some evidence that gossip is connected to the complexity of social relationships. Dunbar (1996) has advanced the theory that language evolved because through gossip, it allowed our ancestors to maintain larger social networks. In a sense, the theory we forward here is similar: Gossip helps us negotiate complex organizational structure and more difficult to access resources in larger, more urbanized, stratified, and complex societies. One reason gossip would be more important within such societies is because it is more difficult to get information one would need for accessing resources and coordinating actions to accomplish goals.

However, another reason for gossip’s importance would be that it satisfies a desire to know one’s social environment generally, a knowledge that might be more difficult to attain in larger, more complex societies. The motivation for achieving the knowledge would be to experience a kind of affect described in other work by one of the authors here (Demerath, 2012). That affect describes our positive aesthetic response to seeing something as more meaningful. We would also seek to avoid alienation, which Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) have described as the denial of aesthetic experience, and which Demerath (1993) has argued causes negative affect. Certainly, the desire to know our social environment is evidenced in the tendencies of individuals to signal their social positions through status markers in language, titles, dress, and ceremonies. Gaining knowledge of the meaning of others through gossip would satisfy the same function. Furthermore, it may be that formal

institutions obfuscate the nature of social ordering, making secondhand information about who is located where all the more important. Indeed, the more important the knowledge is, the more important the gossip would be. This means that loyalty to the society, or other measures of its value, would be correlated with the importance of gossip.

Much research on gossip views it as a strategy for intentionally manipulating perceptions of social actors, rather than an alternative, albeit less reliable way of transmitting and receiving information. From this perspective, gossip is often seen as a tool used by those with less power to influence events. Gossip can function in this way because the speakers cannot be held accountable for interpretations of events they offer when they gossip (Rogers, 1975). Brison (1995) added, though, that gossip is also used by those in power as a means of preserving authority. Government officials intentionally leaking stories to the press is an example of this.

Other research, though, notes the way in which gossip can function as an important means of distributing information. Emler (1993) has argued that research indicates that gossip is a means of adapting to complexity and “community loss”. That loss of community has been associated with urbanization, and is also linked to the marginality of social structural positions, which increase as structures become more complex (Wirth, 1938). Furthermore, Graicunas (1937) originally pointed out that as the size of a group increases, the number of possible interactions grows so rapidly that an individual’s “span of control” soon must eventually cease to cover the entire group. The response to this problem, as Granovetter (1973) has argued, is often a cultivation of “weak ties” and the interaction in those contexts may constitute gossip.

It could be argued, further, that institutionalization is a means of cultivating “weak ties,” of regularizing their use and access. Institutionalization has been seen as a means of coping with complexity, while adding to complexity as well (Luhmann, 1982). As such, it too should be correlated with gossip. Institutionalization includes factors such as a police force, administrative hierarchy, and a judiciary. These characteristics increase the formality of interactions, regularizing them, and making them more efficient. It is for this reason that we would expect institutionalization to be more common in societies that need regularized and efficient interactions because of their size and complexity. This hypothesis is consistent with Weber’s (1968) rationalization thesis stating that as societies grow more complex, their institutions become increasingly rationalized and the development of bureaucracies becomes more prevalent. Furthermore, as described by Marx (1867/1977; Marx & Engels, 1846/1998), among others, a consequence of concentrating resources and organizing in the interests of efficiency can be an increase in

the social inequality of the society, as more resources are available to differentiate classes.

There are a range of ways individuals, groups, and societies can compensate for the decrease in control that comes with a rise in complexity. Douglas (1966), Turner (1969, 1982), and Wuthnow (1987) have shown how ritual and language both respond to ambiguity by dramatizing meaning. Gossip may be part of this response, such that as societies grow in size and complexity, the importance of gossip as a means of control would also increase.

Method

As a means of examining the validity of these hypotheses, we analyzed the published data and codes that constitute the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample of 186 societies (Murdock & White, 1969). The sample was selected to maximize geographic and linguistic variation.

Two variables relating to community size are considered here: “community size” coded by Murdock and Wilson (1972, 1985; STDS [Standard Cross-Cultural Sample], 2001, File STDS03.SAV [v63, v64]), and “urbanization” coded by Murdock and Provost (1973, 1985; STDS, 2001, File STDS06.SAV [v152]). The variables relating to stratification are as follows: “stratification” and “technological specialization” coded by Murdock and Provost (1973, 1985; STDS, 2001, File STDS06.SAV [v153, v158]). The institutionalization variables are as follows: “police,” “administrative hierarchy,” and “judiciary” coded by Tuden and Marshall (1972, 1985; STDS, 2001, File STDS04.SAV [v89, v90, v91]), and “money” coded by Murdock and Provost (1973, 1985; STDS, 2001, File STDS06.SAV [v155]). Seeking an overall measure of institutionalization, we also constructed a scale of institutionalization, combining the variables that measure the presence or absence of police, administrative hierarchy, a judiciary, money, and written records. Because the variables were all the same scale, we were able to simply sum the variables as a means of combining them. Each of these variables measures a degree of formal institutionalization reached by a society. The new variable “institutionalization” yields a six-value ordinal scale.

In supplementary analyses, we examined how the value of gossip might increase due to factors other than institutionalization: the perceived value of the society and gender autonomy. The perceived value of the society was operationalized using the variable “loyalty to the wider society” (Ross, 1983, 1986; STDS, 2001, File STDS30.SAV [v779]). We also looked first at bivariate relationships of the importance of gossip with three different variables related to gender: gender segregation, ritual participation, and occupancy of leadership posts (M. K. Whyte, 1978, 1985; STDS, 2001, File STDS22.SAV

Table 1. Importance of Gossip by Urbanization.

Importance of gossip	Urbanization				Total
	< 100 persons	100-399 persons	400-999 persons	> 1,000 persons	
Less important	24 (66.7%)	29 (56.9%)	8 (47.1%)	5 (33.3%)	66 (55.5%)
More important	12 (33.3%)	22 (43.1%)	9 (52.9%)	10 (66.7%)	53 (44.5%)
Total	36 (100.0%)	51 (100.0%)	17 (100.0%)	15 (100.0%)	119 (100.0%)

Note. Spearman's $\rho = .21$, $p = .024$, two-tailed, $n = 119$.

[v580, v583, v589]). We then looked to see whether the relationships would hold in a multiple regression, where, to avoid multicollinearity, we combined the three gender variables into a single variable, "gender autonomy."

Last, the gossip variable is the importance of gossip coded by Divale and Seda (1999, 2000; STDS, 2001, File STDS83.SAV [v1781–v1805]). Although the details of the coding of all the variables used here are described in the publications cited above, readers should note that the importance of gossip variable is coded to reflect the degree to which gossip was noted by two to three ethnographies of a single culture as being important on an ordinal scale of 1 to 5 (from low to high), and at least two of three of the coders reading the ethnographies must agree on the score. Among the things the variable does not measure is what is being gossiped about, or who is doing the gossiping. In this study, we have used both the full ordinal scale in computing correlations and a dichotomized scale for the cross-tabulations (1-3 = *gossip is less important*; 4-5 = *gossip is more important*).

Findings

We have reasoned that as communities get larger, it becomes more difficult to know individuals and decision-making processes, so gossip should increase as it helps provide knowledge of such things. We used two measures of community size. The Murdock and Wilson Scale "community size" is positively related to the importance of gossip ($\rho = .20$, $N = 119$, $p < .03$, two-tailed) as is Murdock and Provost's "urbanization" scale ($\rho = .20$, $N = 119$, $p < .03$, two-tailed).

Table 1 illustrates the linear nature of the relationship between gossip importance and urbanization. Although we only show that table here, a very similar relationship is found between gossip and community size ($\rho = .21$,

Table 2. Spearman Correlations Between Dimensions of Complexity.

	Community size	Urbanization	Institutionalization	Stratification
Community size		.94** (n = 185)	.50** (n = 179)	.49** (n = 185)
Urbanization	.94** (n = 185)		.53** (n = 179)	.52** (n = 186)
Institutionalization	.50** (n = 179)	.53** (n = 179)		.68** (n = 179)
Stratification	.49** (n = 185)	.52** (n = 186)	.68** (n = 179)	

** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

$p = .012$). The table is shown with Spearman's rho correlation coefficients, significance level for a two-tailed test, and number of cases; for the Spearman's rho computations, we used the maximum number of values; for the crosstabs, we recoded Importance of Gossip into two categories, and other variables into fewer categories for parsimony in illustrating the relationships.

Our primary explanation for the relationship we observe here is that the social order tends to become more complex with increasing community size, and gossip is a means of coping with that condition.

Other variables in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample measure complexity. Like Community Size, the variable Urbanization reflects complexity as a function of population density. Stratification and Institutionalization, however, reflect complexity as a function of differentiation by status and function, respectively. As such, both Stratification and Institutionalization should not only be correlated with gossip, as a means of coping with complexity, but with the other correlates of complexity, urbanization, and community size. Indeed, this is what we find as shown in Table 2, where the rhos between community size and urbanization are significantly correlated with those of institutionalization and stratification.

The theory underlying this article does not specifically distinguish between any one of these variables and their effects on the importance of gossip; all should be related to gossip for similar reasons. However, the effect of institutionalization may be curvilinear when gossip itself becomes institutionalized, a point made in the "Discussion" section of this article.

The link between institutionalization and gossip would be supported by Luhmann's (1982) theory that institutionalization is a response to complexity that increases both differentiation and simplicity. The simplifying aspect lies in the emergent media of communication that reflect the unique orienting values of each institution. As such, talk of love orients familial behavior, power orients political behavior, value does for economic, health for health

Table 3. Importance of Gossip by Institutionalization.

Importance of gossip	Institutionalization		Total
	Less	More	
Less important	59 (59.0%)	3 (20.0%)	62 (53.9%)
More important	41 (41.0%)	12 (80.0%)	53 (46.1%)
Total	100 (100.0%)	15 (100.0%)	115 (100.0%)

Note. Fisher's Exact Test $p = .006$, two-tailed, $n = 115$.

Table 4. Importance of Gossip by Stratification.

Importance of gossip	Stratification			Total
	Egalitarian	Two classes	Three classes	
Less important	30 (63.8%)	29 (56.9%)	7 (33.3%)	66 (55.5%)
More important	17 (36.2%)	22 (43.1%)	14 (66.7%)	53 (44.5%)
Total	47 (100.0%)	51 (100.0%)	21 (100.0%)	119 (100.0%)

Note. Spearman's $\rho = .192$, $p = .037$, two-tailed, $n = 119$.

care, and so on. Gossip would become increasingly important as a means of evaluating behavior according to increasingly differentiated standards. As the world gets more complex, talk gets more important as a means of sorting it out. The following tables test the hypotheses that institutionalization and stratification are related to gossip. Both crosstabs show support for the hypothesis, with the comparable percentages in bold.

Luhmann's theory aside, the relationships we see in the Tables 3 and 4 can be explained with relatively simple idea that as information about people and decisions affecting individuals becomes harder to come by in larger, more complex societies, gossip becomes more important. Furthermore, the information attained through gossip may become more valuable as there are more resources at stake in more highly stratified societies.

Related to this idea that the importance of gossip is a function of the resources at stake is the notion that the value of those resources is, in turn, a function of the value of the society. Because of this, we hypothesize that the variable "Loyalty to the Wider Society" should also show a significant relationship with gossip. Table 5 shows that there is such a relationship.

Although the relationships presented to this point were predicted by our hypotheses, in the course of our analyses, we uncovered a set of relationships concerning gender that we did not expect, and which we explored through a

Table 5. Importance of Gossip by Loyalty to Wider Society.

Importance of gossip	Loyalty to the wider society			Total
	Low	Moderate	High	
Less important	10 (66.7%)	15 (60.0%)	8 (33.3%)	33 (51.6%)
More important	5 (33.3%)	10 (40.0%)	16 (66.7%)	31 (48.4%)
Total	15 (100.0%)	25 (100.0%)	24 (100.0%)	64 (100.0%)

Note. Spearman's $\rho = .270$, $p = .031$, two-tailed, $n = 64$.

Table 6. Importance of Gossip by Gender Integration in Subsistence Activity.

Importance of gossip	Degree of integration			Total
	Men and women segregated	Some segregation	Little or no segregation	
Less important	9 (81.8%)	14 (51.9%)	4 (30.8%)	27 (52.9%)
More important	2 (18.2%)	13 (48.1%)	9 (69.2%)	24 (47.1%)
Total	11 (100.0%)	27 (100.0%)	13 (100.0%)	51 (100.0%)

Note. Spearman's $\rho = .347$, $p = .013$, two-tailed, $n = 51$.

Table 7. Importance of Gossip by Gender Participation in Rituals.

Importance of gossip	Gender participation in rituals		Total
	Male dominated	Equal or female dominated	
Less important	17 (70.8%)	7 (29.2%)	24 (50.0%)
More important	7 (29.2%)	17 (70.8%)	24 (50.0%)
Total	24 (100.0%)	24 (100.0%)	48 (100.0%)

Note. Fisher's Exact Test $p = .004$, two-tailed, $n = 48$.

supplementary analysis. It appears that the importance of gossip is positively associated with the degree to which women have autonomy in the society and occupy central locations in economic, political, and cultural activities. Degree of integration by gender in subsistence activity, participation of women in rituals, and the degree to which women occupy leadership posts are all positively related to the importance of gossip. Tables 6 to 8 show these relationships.

Table 8. Importance of Gossip by Women's Occupancy of Leadership Positions.

Importance of gossip	Leadership positions in kinship or extended family			Total
	Men only	Both, but men more likely	Both, roughly equal in likelihood	
Less important	22 (57.9%)	2 (50.0%)	0	24 (53.3%)
More important	16 (42.1%)	2 (50.0%)	3 (100.0%)	21 (46.7%)
Total	38 (100.0%)	4 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)	45 (100.0%)

Note. Spearman's $\rho = 3.764$, $p = .152$, two-tailed, $n = 45$.

We would use caution in explaining these relationships, and resist essentialist arguments before assessing the validity of more immediate factors, such as structural ones. Structural factors would include the constraints and opportunities women have for transmitting and receiving information in marginalized positions, and could have implications for developing techniques of distributing information that might be labeled as gossip. Furthermore, when women gain influence in societies and have more contact with men in the course of economic, political, and cultural activity, the style they have developed for distributing information becomes a more accepted style (Artemova & Korotayev, 2003; de Munck & Korotayev, 1999). However, this may work in concert with more essentialist explanations that view women as more communicative due to their greater role in child care, and thus better at connecting with others through the exchange of information, rather than through sharing participation in an activity as men are viewed.

One can be naturally skeptical of any bivariate relationship using cross-sectional data, speculating how a given relationship may be spurious and is consequence of some form of bias. The validity of the variables used in this type of data is a common concern. One of our such concerns was whether the importance of gossip was affected by the sex of the coders, the informants, or the ethnographer. However, our check on that possibility revealed the sex of coders and sex of informants to be unrelated to the importance of gossip (the Spearman's rho coefficients being .07 and -.08 and their significance being .609 and .558, respectively). However, as of yet, there is no variable in the data set on the sex of the ethnographer.

So far, we have shown the importance of gossip to be associated with the size and complexity of societies (operationalized as community size, institutionalization, urbanization, and stratification) as well as the perceived value of the society (operationalized as loyalty to the wider society). Furthermore,

Table 9. Frequency of Gender Autonomy.

Gender autonomy	
Value	Frequency
0	4
1	9
2	7
3	13
4	8
5	3

we have also shown how gossip importance is also associated with gender autonomy (operationalized as gender segregation, ritual participation, and occupancy of leadership posts). The final step in our analysis is to test whether these different variables constitute separate effects on gossip, or whether some of the effects would disappear when controlling for all of them. To do this, we conducted a multiple regression.

Before conducting the regression, however, we took two steps to avoid the multicollinearity that could be caused by the independent variables of community size, institutionalization, urbanization, and stratification being so highly correlated with one another. First, we chose urbanization to represent that group of variables on the basis that it had the highest average correlation with the other three variables. Second, we created a summary variable, "gender autonomy," by combining the three gender variables (simply summing and averaging them as they are all on the same scale). The result is a six-value ordinal scale with the following frequency distribution (Table 9).

The highest score on gender autonomy indicates a society has the highest degree of gender integration in subsistence activity, of female occupation of leadership positions, and of participation in community rituals, and the lowest score indicates the inverse. One consequence of using the gender variables in the regression—or a combination of them such as this—is the number of cases used in the analysis will be relatively low at 44 total cases. Table 10 shows the results of the regression.

The standardized beta coefficients displayed above reveal the strongest effect on the dependent variable to be that of Gender Autonomy with beta higher than 1.0, significant at .0001; followed by Urbanization with beta as high as .659, significant at .002; and Loyalty to the Wider Society with a much smaller value of beta (.330), that is still statistically significant at < .05 level.

Table 10. Results of Linear Regression on Gossip.

Independent variables	B	SE	β	T	Significance (two-tailed)
Intercept	-2.291	0.917		-2.660	.034
Gender autonomy	0.627	0.099	1.009	6.325	.0001
Urbanization	0.637	0.152	.659	4.182	.002
Loyalty to the wider society	0.498	0.219	.330	2.280	.049

Note. Dependent variable: Importance of gossip. $R^2 = .832$, Adjusted $R^2 = .776$; $n = 44$.

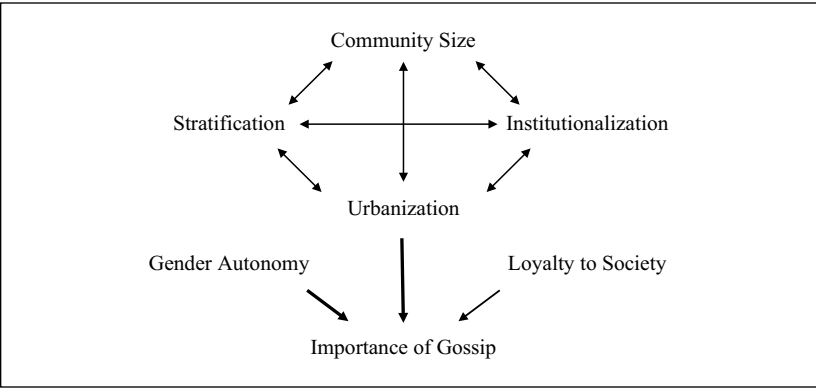


Figure 1. An overall model.

Discussion of Results

The findings we have presented here consist of a range of relationships of the importance of gossip with other variables. At this point, and given the regression model presented above, we postulate a model of what determines the importance of gossip in a society, while leaving the causal direction of the other variables open. Because we have been treating these data as cross-sectional, we have no longitudinal analyses to test the causality of these relationships. Moreover, either causal direction between any of these relationships is at least plausible. The model is shown in Figure 1.

Our analysis has revealed a relationship between gender autonomy and the importance of gossip in these data. Although the causal direction of the relationship is debatable, we suspect that gender autonomy is the causal agent. We think it is plausible that as gender autonomy evens the playing field for

more members of the society, information exchange increases in importance, and thus does gossip.

The top of the model shows community size, urbanization, stratification, and institutionalization all associated with one another. There are plausible reasons for each of them causing the other. We do not attempt to disentangle their effects here. Instead, we interpret those variables as an “urbanization group” of variables, one that affects the importance of gossip directly and indirectly. The indirect effects of the urbanization variables are through increasing resources on one hand, and increasing the ideological control over those resources, and thus, their perceived value, on the other. By increasing resources, information exchange about those resources becomes more important, hence the importance of gossip. Furthermore, in having greater ideological control over those resources through institutionalizing political hierarchy, and thereby increasing political legitimation, the perception of those resources as valuable would increase, as reflected in greater loyalty to the wider society. Thus, not only do more urbanized, institutionalized societies have more resources, but those resources are more likely to be valued because their ideological apparati are likely to have been more developed. In other words, these societies have more resources in both real terms and in terms that are socially constructed. Compared with other societies, then, gossip on how to access those resources would be seen as more important. Whether the effect of the urbanization group of variables is indirect, or direct, the reasoning behind either set of effects is in line with the general idea that gossip is simply more important in larger, more stratified, and more institutionalized societies. This is the explanation that underlies the hypothesis motivating the study: In larger societies, there is greater competition for resources (reflected in the urbanization and stratification correlations) and thus more restricted access to those resources (reflected in the institutionalization correlation). Gossip then becomes more valued as a means of gaining information on who has access to resources, and how to get access to resources.

The analysis and model presented here thus seem to posit the following linear relationship: The more complex the society, the more gossip there is. That would imply highly industrialized societies would value gossip more than any other kind. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, it is quite likely true, especially if we remind ourselves of two things: What gossip is—second hand discussion of social news—and how readily societies institutionalize tasks originally accomplished in micro-interaction, such as socialization, education, health care, and social control. Our need to gain information about people we do not know, or events where we were not present, is similarly institutionalized. The news industry is a large one in highly modernized societies, and talk shows and tabloids with both insider views and person-on-the-street perspectives are mass-marketed products.

Extrapolating the Findings to Contemporary Societies

An important consideration in any analysis comparing societies such as this is what it implies for contemporary, highly modernized and “post-modern” societies. The Standard Cross-Cultural Sample used for this analysis underrepresents such societies, constituting less than 5% of the sample of societies. To name some societies on either ends of the urbanization and institutionalization continua, we have not been comparing the contemporary United States or Japan, for example, with Peru or Thailand but instead, comparing Egyptians, Hebrews, Russians, and Japanese with Kung Bushmen, Lapps, and Copper Eskimo. This means that the relationship we identify here of gossip and institutionalization only applies to our societies of high institutionalization if we allow ourselves to extrapolate beyond the range of data we have here.

There is reason to think the relationship can be extrapolated to include highly modernized and post-modern societies, but gossip in a different form: gossip ready-made and mass marketed. First, mass media can be considered to be forums for macro-level gossip. Be they respectable forums such as *The Times* or *Le Monde*, or less respectable tabloids, these forums tell us news and rumors, describing and evaluating the world for us in a way similar that we do for each other in course of everyday conversation. However, such macro-level means of sense making, though ready-made for us, may not be as fulfilling as doing it ourselves at the micro-level. We achieve a more personally relevant fit of a sense-making description when we do it ourselves, through the exchange of gossip, or personal stories, or opinions. Previous to this study, Demerath (1993, 2012) has developed a theory of affect that implies it is the micro-level sense making, such as real one-on-one gossiping, that is the most rewarding. However, Demerath also argues that macro- and micro-level sense making take the same basic forms of articulating, typifying, and orienting our experience. The general trajectory of institutionalization associated with steadily increasing specialization, urbanization, and bureaucracy may mean that mass media will continue to rise in importance, playing the role of the juicy gossip in our increasingly separated existence from one another. Specifically, we would posit three reasons why gossip on the micro-level is being replaced by gossip on the macro-level in highly modernized societies: physical separation due to suburban development and automobile travel, the cost-efficacy and ease of use of mass-produced gossip, and the legitimacy and transparency of institutions.

Over the past 50 years, a range of writers and researchers have described that separated existence of contemporary society (e.g., Jacobs, 1961;

Oldenburg, 1984; Puttnam, 2001; Speck, 2012; W. H. Whyte, 1980). Particularly in the suburban developments, housing is separated from other functions such as work, shopping, recreation, and school such that each setting is only reachable via automobile. As walking is eliminated from the daily routine, so is the likelihood of bumping into neighbors and chatting with them, or talking in the course of a walk with family or friends.² Reducing pedestrian activity has thus functioned to reduce casual interaction, and gossip as well, hence the rise of mass media.

Second, mass media-produced gossip is, in some substantial ways, better than micro-level gossip, and is certainly marketed to make it seem so. The production values are higher, where mass media companies marshal resources to produce something much more polished than anything an individual could produce. Compare conversation about the world over the kitchen table with that over the television talk-show table, and the latter will appear to be of higher quality on virtually every count. What the talk show does not have is the immediacy and satisfaction of being self-produced.

Third, highly industrialized societies generate enough resources to support their institutions and ensure their efficient operation, or, at least, the appearance of their efficient operation (in the form of legitimacy). As for the former effect, with enough resources, an institution can be made to operate efficiently, in part because it can be made transparent. There is enough money to post signs that say what office serves what purpose, and there is enough money to create offices that specialize in tasks. As anyone who has lived in a lesser developed country with underregulated bureaucracy can tell you, there are times when one is unsure of where to go for help, and a little gossip as to who would help—or who would not—can go a long way. In contrast, members of better-funded and better-regulated bureaucracies are less likely to need to use gossip as a means of navigating the social order. However, useful gossip comes from socializing and social capital, so it is not surprising that we should find evidence that one's social life is better in societies where the institutions are worse (Demerath, 2005).

Indeed, one interpretation stimulated by these findings is that gossip and micro-level sense-making interaction in general are probably more important than ever for allowing ourselves to feel comfortably secure in increasingly alienating, bureaucratized societies. However, in at least some of those societies, a convergence of individualism, advanced capitalism, and technology has reduced forums for such interaction replacing it instead with the ready-made information we need for access to resources. Because we do not participate in the making of that information, that is, because we no longer have to make our own gossip, we are alienated from our own abilities to collectively make sense of the world and we are less fulfilled than we would otherwise be.

That said, the rise of digital communication media may be, in part, a response to this. Many a text and tweet concern the actions of third parties, be they friends, celebrities, or governments.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests the importance of gossip increases with societal complexity. It also reveals a relationship between gossip—which can be viewed as a means of control—and gender autonomy. To see how these relationships extend to contemporary societies, a thorough comparison of many coded ethnographies of highly industrialized societies would be required. An expansion of the standard cross-cultural sample to include highly industrialized societies would serve this sort of inquiry (and many others of its kind). As with all cross-cultural research, these findings give us a perspective from which to critically assess our own societies, even when they are not included in the sample of societies being analyzed.

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Notes

1. Note that this definition is quite congruent with the one used by Divale and Seda (1999): “idle talk or rumor, especially about the private affairs of others” (p. 7).
2. Compared with walking, when driving, one is also probably less likely to stop off for a beer, or cup of tea, at a neighborhood bar or café on the way home from work or shopping. In the United States, where cities are built largely around cars, Oldenburg (1984) describes how urban planning, or the lack of it, has caused “third places” (which are gathering places that are neither home nor work, such as pubs, barber shops, cafes) that have been virtually designed out of the American landscape.

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