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Reflections on Mediated Gossip

In this paper I would like to advance some reflections about the construct of gossip and its social practice from my observatory on the new media. According to Foster (2004), who reviewed half century of gossip research, psychological research has been relatively little on this topic. Furthermore, most data are not parametric. So he argues that both gossip theory needs to be strengthened and that research methods could benefit from the application of neurobiological and social network analysis. The gossip is a communicative practice which corresponds to the 'social grooming' among primates. However, among humans this practice becomes more complicated because it is carried out in the backstage of social communication, that is in its informal level. In fact it is practised in absence of the person who is object of the gossip and in co-presence with interlocutors. The absence of the person object of gossip is a fundamental premise, because it allows a more free expression of thinking on his/her behaviour. Social spaces are in fact governed by rules of discretion (Simmel, 1906) and by the concern to not say unpleasant things to the others. Gossip is an old communicative practice that has had a great social efficiency in pre-industrial societies.

In the traditional everyday life, this practice, such as it was experienced in rural villages, served as exercise of social comparison and control, re-affirmation of social rules and moral norms, elaboration and structuration of reality (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Modernization with its social consequences such as urbanization, development of individualization and spread of depersonalized and psychologically neutral social relationships, reshaped the social and communicative structure in which people were living. The anonymity of urban crowds and the new spatial organization of civil coexistence changed partially the practice of gossip. This practice has enlarged and was modified with the advent of both traditional and new media (Harrington & Bielby, 1995). The press was the first that captured this need and conveyed it even through more or less dedicate magazines (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Then, other information and communication technologies such as the telephone, mobile, television and the internet have been means of communication which this practice has tried to colonize (Thornborrow & Morris, 2004). Mediated gossip has ended up with cohabiting with gossip in co-presence (Fox, 2001). But what is new in the mediated gossip if compared to gossip in co-presence? Do its social meaning and functions have changed when it is carried out through new media?

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