

ONLINE GOSSIP AS A SOURCE OF COMMUNICATIVE ADVANTAGE FOR COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

In a world that may be described by information revolution, it is becoming more and more important to discover the diffusion of information and news in a new technological environment. We are not dependent but, more in control of receiving and forwarding information in this technology driven environment. What we can find is that in today's interpersonal communications, even corporate communications, gossip-like information gain a more important role.

Starting from the psychological notion of gossip we asked the question how gossip occurs, evolves and disperses on the internet, what the main criteria of its diffusion and how these may be taken into service of a company. The power of gossip derives from its biological basis that is communication advantage. The "newsmonger" may be described with good memory, being up-to-date even in non-gossip like situations. The spread of info is faster and more precise among people with similar professions or of common interest. The content of the gossip identifies with level of its audience.

We conducted multiple research methods in order to discover about the nature of gossip of corporate interest: content analyses of blogs (N=10) and forums (N=10); online in-depth interviews (N=10); and individual consumer narratives (N=100). Our research shows that companies may lead and use gossip in an online context for their own communication intentions, however, corporate presence in terms of online gossips has to fulfil requirements in order to remain acceptable: that are specific language and place, openness, being direct about expressing intention and origin. In our paper we are going to present our major results and theoretical model

Keywords

online, gossip, word-of-mouth, content analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In a world that may be described by information revolution, it is becoming more and more important to discover the diffusion of information and news in a new technological environment. We are not dependent but, more in control of receiving and forwarding information in this technology driven environment. What we can find is that in today's interpersonal communications, even corporate communications, gossip-like information gain a more important role. In our research we explore the characteristics of gossip and investigate how this knowledge may help companies in controlling on-line word of mouth serving their communication objectives.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

„Real gossip”

*“Absolute gossip: when the mute tells the deaf that the blind sees the cripple running”
(Anonymus, online forum poster)*

Gossip is a "here and now" phenomenon, which exists and relevant among members of relatively small and closed groups. In order to understand it, group membership, special vocabulary and connection networks are to be studied. Rumour is a piece of news, that is circulated from one person to the other, without having to be proven. For a piece of news to become rumour it has to be relatively significant, and its underlying facts are to be dubious. (Fraisie, 1965)

Rumourous statements pursue modifications on their ways being told by one to the other, which could be:

1. loosening or shallowing details;
2. overemphasizing one aspect, even dramatizing it;
3. comparison, even assimilation as a result of modifying details in the direction that is according to the attitudes of the group.

Evolution of gossip may be characterized by special vocabulary and special scenes. The scene, the place where the gossip evolves is important, this is where the flow of statements depart: what we hear from whom and what our opinion about this was.

Gossip is created by specific usage of words, accents and emphases, and furthermore most importantly by our own opinions. This is how we can express what we feel, and imply what others are expected to think about it. Then a little ☺ distortion, bias, feud, envy, enlargement or reduction as added, that is also influenced by the actual state of mind of the moment.

Szvetelszky (2002) indicates that spread of the gossip is faster and more precise among people with common background and interest. Personal networks and their tendency to become of one gender is universal, and that tends to be similar to the dynamics of mass communication. Its content and structure "degrades" to the intellectual level of its audience.

Virtual gossip – gossip online

“Back in the old days, they called him a newsmonger. Today, he is an information expert.”
(Szvetelszky, 2002)

While gossip takes place in the form of interpersonal communication that occurs in hearing distance, and its scope is identical to the group's range, when generated in the online virtual environment, its scene, dynamics and diffusion would change.

Today's emerging successful marketing communication solutions are characterized by interactivity, user generated content and its diffusion, which takes several forms:

- sites based on personal networks (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)
- sites based on shared content (e.g. Youtube, Flickr)
- specialized personal networks, collaborative professional networks (e.g. B2B electronic marketplace sites, Basecamp)

Table 1. Offline and online gossip compared

Gossip offline – rumor spread orally	Dimensions for comparison	Gossip online – rumor spread online
✓ News concerning in some way the life of a given group. People affected by the news come from within the group. <i>Gossip between two people generally about a third person.</i>	Notable news	✓ Important novelty, strange news, inconsistent with prior knowledge. The object is not necessarily of a personal matter.
✓ A story unverified, altered through tellers' memories of it.	Unverified / doubtful data	✗ Users interested can search the focal point, way of diffusion and variants of a content with keywords. The author of the initial message, or at least his/her virtual identity is sort of known.
✓ The source of the information; the most exact the knowledge of the information is an undeniable source of superiority within the group as others turn for news to the one best knowing it.	Superiority in communication	✓ ✗ News that attract many readers have a considerable (monetary) value as can generate media coverage. On the individual level, possession and diffusion of news can be a factor of one's own personal success
✓ Personal notoriety only. May be used to delimit the boundaries of a social group A natural group and within, a more or less mutual trust. A shared system of values and interests.	Social networks	✓ Groups gathered around fields of interest. Online users knowing each other by user name, profile data and replies. Blogs' topics determine its community of readers, but it is unsure whether the community would exist without the blog itself.
✓ Object of gossip changes with the personal interpretation, vocabulary and distortion of the teller.	Continuous change	✗ As content can be copied and forwarded <i>verbatim</i> , the original text remains
✓ Idiosyncratic introductory phrases: “I heard that / The story goes that...” “Don't tell this to anyone, but...”	Special vocabulary	✓ Typical use of language and abbreviations, simplifications online
Junctions, scenes for gossip: Pubs, church gardens, bakeries, ...	Specific locations	Web 2.0

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Starting from the psychological notion of gossip we asked the question how gossip occurs, evolves and disperses on the internet, what the main criteria of its diffusion are and how these maybe taken into service of a company.

How this knowledge may help companies in controlling on-line word of mouth serving their communication objectives?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Multiple research methodology was applied in order to record and focus on real life data, to explore spontaneous spread of information

Table 2.: Research methodology used in our analysis

Applied methodology	Focus	Subjects	Research questions
Narrative analysis of consumers	„real” offline gossip	100 narratives	What are the prerequisites to the acceptance and transmission?
Deep interviews	„real” offline gossip vs. virtual gossip	10 near-expert, active forum users	When and under what condition do corporate-generated (commercial or advertising) content diffuse?
Blog content analysis	virtual gossip – online gossip	10 active blog sites in a pre-selected theme	When and under what condition do online communities come to existence? When and how do they subsist? How important is spontaneity? Where do brands and companies appear?
Forum content analysis	virtual gossip	8 active sub-forums of general forums	

FINDINGS

Bellow we give a condensed summary of our major findings, our goal is to reflect the multiple research methods applied.

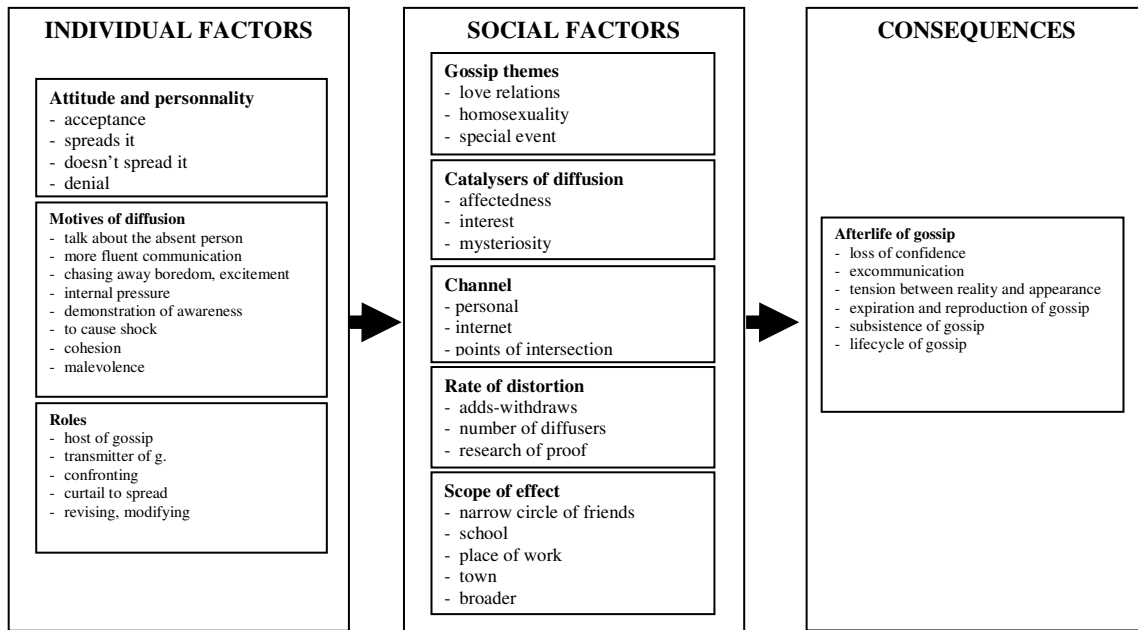
Factors influencing the diffusion of gossip – consumer narratives

Our model based upon the narrative analysis of consumers, in accordance with our literature review, shows that there are many similarities between ‘classical’ gossip and online gossip, although a number of differences are noticeable. The diffusion and the contents of interpersonal gossip is basically more diverse, far more personal and elaborate.

Characteristics of the real i.e. offline gossip are summarized in our “gossip-value” model. (Figure 1.). Gossip has to be interesting, so to say different, a combination of seemingly unrelated things, therefore creates surprise by its unexpected content. The more people are concerned with a particular gossip the faster it spreads. An obscure piece of gossip is mystical, therefore spreads faster. However, it is also important that gossip should seem credible, and for being remembered the basic story or sketch is to be simplified. Thus, the simple story is to be enriched by colourful details.

Gossip basically spreads through interpersonal communication, internet can enhance the pace of its diffusion, however online presence lacks numerous characteristics. While a narrow group friends, narrow communities of family, work, area gossip travel through social contacts, less personal gossip-like information spread on the internet.

Figure 1: Factors influencing the diffusion of gossip – gossip value model



Online vs. offline gossip or rumour – expert in-depth interviews

Our exploratory research shows that among well trained users, experts by experience are aware and easily identify and describe gossip, online gossip, the phenomena of forums and blogs, its importance and dynamics. This implies that our theoretical framework (see Table 1.) is fully reflected in the expert comments. Experts fully understand that gossip is the phenomenon of “here and now”, and only relevant for a group concerned about the topic. Bellow we present few typical statements given by experts:

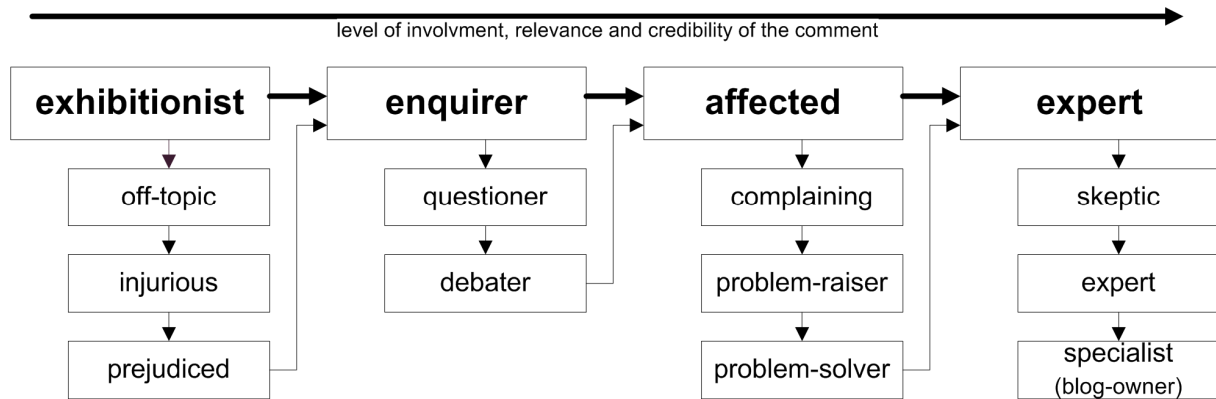
Table 3: Online vs offline gossip

Offline gossip – rumor spread verbally		Online gossip – rumor spread over the internet
<p>“Has little foundation, everyone embellishes the story, spreads mouth to mouth. They try to complete missing parts with their own thoughts, they embellish the story” (man, 24, IT-professional)</p>	<p>Notable news</p>	<p>“With online, there’s the possibility to check it right away but we often don’t take into account whether the source is trustworthy [...] If it’s written down, sometimes you involuntarily believe that’s true [...] The gossip remains the same” (man, 26, journalist)</p>
<p>“There are people having given aims with it, some simply like it when they have information that others don’t...” (woman, 21, student, vice-president of an NGO)</p>	<p>Superiority in communication</p>	<p>“Powerful person. ☺ Has power over things, can tell a whole forum if something’s good or bad [...] after a while everyone will turn to him with questions about that” (man, 26, journalist)</p>
<p>Aunt Julie, Aunt Mary, blablablalbla... They must have sipped it with breast milk. Gossip has a negative meaning for sure. Old people are bored, they’ve got nothing else to do but to talk negatively of young people” (woman, 34, interpret)</p>	<p>Social networks</p>	<p>“I show myself. Recognition, in normal dimensions” (man, 26, IT-professional) “You belong to a community” (man, 26, project manager)</p>
<p>“Gossip like who goes out with whom, who cheated on who, topics related to a promotion in work, why one has got promoted... the same info will be shared by each one with a different reason” (woman, 21, vice-president of an NGO)</p>	<p>Continuous change</p>	<p>“If there’s some news, everyone refers to some kind of source. If it’s shady, I try to look for the source and read the original” (man, 26, journalist)</p>
<p>“Hm, maybe it’s my obsession, but people already misunderstand each other verbally, ... these topics for surm and this ‘putting a coal on fire’” (woman, 34, interpret)</p>	<p>Special vocabulary</p>	<p>“There are a lot of grammar-freaks... if you read a post with many comments orthography will be an issue” (man, 26, journalist) “I really hated the smiley sign but for some time now I’ve been forced to use it” (woman, 22, student)</p>

Online content: blogs and forums – content analysis

In our analysis we discovered that the effect mechanisms of ‘echoing’ on the two kinds of boards don’t differ considerably. We identified four distinct groups of posters, according to the relevance of their comments. “Exhibitionists” hardly added any value to the topic of the entry. Within this group, we distinguished off topic entries, e.g. “first posters”, injurious and prejudiced commenters. “Enquirers” contributed to some level of discussion, even though far from the original subject. Either they started a topic, enquired advice or about an offer or reacted to an earlier point of discussion, although often without real arguments. “Affected” users related more to the topic in question. They were complaining about a service or product, raised problems about them or, on a higher level of expertise, proposed answers, advices to others’ problems. “Experts” gave comprehensive and fully relevant remarks and answers to the topic. They revealed potential contradictions in the subject and answered problems raised by “affected” posters. The thorough typology of users can be seen on Figure 2.

Figure 2:
 Typology of comments in the analysed boards, with regard to the relevance of the comment



IMPLICATIONS

There is an overlap between online and offline gossip. When deliberately spreading gossip over the internet, it would be advisable to keep the personal nature of real-life gossip.

The diffusion of online gossip is linear and searchable. It is not defined by the distortion of the original message but by the number of comments generated by a given post. We can observe distinct personal roles online: “experts”, “affected”, “enquirers” and “exhibitionists”.

An explicit corporate appearance among online comments is far more tolerated than seemingly objective comments that unmistakably emanate from an ‘undercover’ and anonymous poster.

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