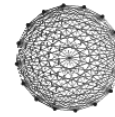


# *The Magic of Gossip*

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## *Introduction*

Gossip has been around as long as human conversation. Usually, gossip is considered a destructive force. After all, gossip killed Socrates. Gossip killed Christ. Gossip killed the "witches" who were burned or drowned or mutilated during the seventeenth century. Gossip continues to kill, every day, in the form of harassment and cyberbullying that leads to suicide – especially among queer or trans youth, or young people who have been raped or otherwise abused. Rehtaeh Parsons and Leelah Alcorn are just two examples.

But the sword of gossip cuts both ways. Gossip is also a way of gathering and accreting hidden knowledge in communities. Gossip, after all, is how "everyone" "knew" about figures like Bill Cosby, Michael Jackson, Woody Allen, Jimmy Savile, and other figures long suspected of years of abuse and criminal behavior. Gossip is how parishioners discussed Catholic priests in Boston and other cities. Gossip, often derided because it associated with femininity and girlishness and childishness, is also a defense mechanism within communities that use hidden knowledge for protection.

Gossip, in short, is magic. Which means that the Internet is a ritual space.

## *Magic as Hidden Knowledge*

Much like gossip, magic has also been seen as as a destructive and mostly feminine force throughout global history. In fact, the use of magic is one of the few "universal" taboos: from Biblical prohibitions against magic to contemporary "witch villages" in Ghana, magic is seen as both an unfair advantage and as a source of great power. Magical knowledge or esoterica is, like gossip, a sort of hidden privilege. It is a way of getting ahead, because it involves knowing the right information at the right time, and knowing how to deploy it. The connection between gossip and magic is so deep that in hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork practices throughout the African diaspora and specifically throughout North America, "Shut up!" and "Stop talking" spells are common. In Greek and other magic-oriented communities which hold to the *nazra* or "Evil Eye," gossip can be seen as a form of envy which, even without any deliberate intent, can become a form of curse.

 **Overleaf**

What differentiates magic from gossip is that magic is a systematic form of knowledge. Because magic involves ritual, and ritual is a way of performing information, it requires an organized grouping of knowledge. Gossip, by contrast, is free flowing. It can be organized, whether via blog category or via hashtag, but its nature is to flow organically between the people who are gossiping. Gossip, like magic, is both a verb and a noun.

### *Can the Magical Power of Gossip Help Us Fight Evil?*

Yes. In fact, it already has. Gossip has helped the public learn about abuse, as in the aforementioned situations, but it's also a way of interacting with politically powerful figures. Consider the fact that "spooks" and others in the cybersecurity community had gossiped about the nature of NSA and FBI sousveillance for years before Edward Snowden released the data he had gathered on his employers about their observation of the American people. Snowden's documents both confirmed much of the gossip that had surrounded the NSA, and also changed the existing conversation, leading to further change.

But there is more to do. Gossip is a powerful force, which means it requires the rigor of ritual. Communities – covens – of gossip already exist on the Internet, at sites like *TMZ*, *JustJared*, *Gossip Cop*, *ONTD*, or *Lainey Gossip*.