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Virtual gossip: How gossip regulates moral life in virtual worlds

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ABSTRACT

This article explores to what extent the functions of interpersonal offline gossip can be mapped on to the virtual community of Second Life and its subsequent in-world and out-world interactions. A long-term hybrid ethnographic study was conducted that involved recurrent actual and virtual meetings with informants. The main objectives are, first, to look for similarities and to explain dissimilarities and, second, to gain some much-needed insight into how moral life is structured in social virtual communities and how important the role of gossip is. Results show overlaps between online and offline gossip concerning uses and functions. Gossip is important as a means for reputation management; as a cultural learning system; as a sanctioning system; and as entertainment. Just as in traditional offline communities, gossip is a central mechanism to regulate virtual moral life that stretches out to blogs, websites, and face-to-face meetings. Yet, technology amplifies the effects by creating new possibilities such as logging the evidence in order to spot cheaters. This way, in-world gossip becomes an inflated form of traditional gossip.

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1. Introduction

Social interactions are “fundamentally shaped by moral concerns” (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010, p. 9). Moral frameworks and judgments structure the sociality of the cultures that one is part of. Developing and engaging in groups “shapes our reasoning and reactions, our judgments and embodied senses of ‘proper’ and ‘taboo’” (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010, p. 9). Gossip has an important share in delineating group boundaries (Gluckman, 1963) and maintaining social cohesion (Dunbar, 2006). Several mechanisms underlie the relationship between gossip and social cohesion (see e.g. Foster (2004) for a detailed discussion of the multiple functions of gossip), and passing on information about morally accepted behaviour plays a crucial role in this process (e.g. Piazza & Bering, 2008; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011).

The core aim of this article is to study if and how gossip also regulates moral concerns in the social virtual world. The general research objective is to examine to what extent the functions and uses of everyday gossip are echoed in virtual settings. There is ample evidence that actual and virtual life overlap on several levels (see e.g. Miller & Slater, 2000; Orgad, 2005; 2006). Throughout the

past decades, several studies showed that life in virtual communities is in many respects continuous with face-to-face settings (see e.g. Carter, 2005; Markham, 1998). Yet, to our surprise, except some notable exceptions (Cherny, 1999), few studies have researched gossip in social virtual worlds.

Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003), a three-dimensional user-created shared virtual space where avatars represent actual human beings, will serve as our field site. Second Life is the largest and most popular social virtual world without predetermined objective that has gained wide public and academic attention. Numerous studies have focused on Second Life from various angles and disciplines but not on how gossip might strengthen virtual community life. On average, Second Life still has a million users per month and, depending on the time of day one logs in, there are between 30,000 and 50,000 people logged in simultaneously (Dwell on It, 2016; web). Linden Lab, Second Life’s development company, empowers the so-called ‘residents’ by allowing them to design the world by building and selling virtual property. In addition, Second Life has an open ethical design: residents can impose their norms in the world, instead of merely applying the rules and norms that the developers programmed. Residents can implement their moral reasoning in relation to the virtual surroundings, which are open to the results of that moral reflection (Sicart, 2009, p. 214). Second Life’s design stimulates social interaction and, in doing so, it facilitates possibilities to share gossip. For instance, there is a friendlist on which one can see who is on- or offline; one can offer friendship; and

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friends can be located. Linden Lab offers numerous ways to communicate, such as voice chat (speech), public chat, and private instant messaging (IM).

Contrary to game-oriented multi-user virtual worlds, residents are free to choose how to spend their time in-world (i.e. within the virtual surroundings of Second Life) and how to assign meaning to their virtual activities. In contrast to offline communities, residents can benefit from a great amount of freedom and autonomy. Many residents fulfil this freedom by establishing social relations (Boellstorff, 2008). They place intense emotional energies into this world while engaging with others in real-time. This raises compelling questions concerning morality: if residents are given 'total' freedom in a virtual environment, how is moral life regulated? What role does gossip have in this process?

The article starts with an overview of the general functions of gossip and their relevance to the establishment and maintenance of moral concerns in social life, then discusses studies that have investigated how gossip functions in social virtual worlds, and puts forward some further questions. A long-term hybrid ethnographic study (Jordan, 2009; Gabriels and Bauwens, 2014) with recurrent actual and virtual meetings was conducted with a core sample of twenty experienced Second Life residents. In addition to this core sample, there were 'virtual' informants that were met solely in-world.¹ This methodological choice is fully grounded upon the conceptual framework that rejects the view that social virtual worlds are walled-off spaces in which actual life cannot intrude (cf. infra). Virtual life spills over into actual life as well, for instance by prolonging virtual encounters to face-to-face meetings. Following Orgad (2006), recognition of the interplay or hybridization between the virtual and the actual on a conceptual level needs to be adequately addressed on a methodological level. Jordan (2009, p. 181, p. 183) elaborates on how hybridization forces researchers to rethink the conventional methods leading to "a new type of ethnography", that is, hybrid ethnography. Several researchers apply hybridization in their ethnography and hence literally move along with research participants in both virtual and actual spaces (e.g. Miller & Slater, 2000; Orgad, 2005).

Our research findings will show that the uses and functions of in-world gossip are similar to their role and purposes in traditional communities. Gossip is important, first, as a means for reputation management; second, as a cultural learning system; third, as a sanctioning system; and finally, as a form of entertainment to strengthen existing relations. Gossip has an important share in the regulation of virtual moral life. Yet, there are discontinuities, unattainable in offline communities. Technology amplifies the effects by creating new possibilities such as logging the evidence in order to spot cheaters and by increasing the amount of potential receivers. These results are discussed along with an agenda for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition and motives to gossip offline and online

Gossip is a human universal (Brown, 1991). Above all, gossip is complex, which is reflected in the debate on how to grasp it in a definition. While reviewing the most common disputable issues, Foster (2004, p. 83) summarized multiple definitions of gossip as follows: "in a context of congeniality, the exchange of personal

information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties". Foster (2004) carefully summarized many issues of what to include and exclude from gossip that researchers have debated about. We refer to his work for this detailed overview and only highlight two topics of discussion that are of specific relevance to study gossip in online environments. Firstly, there is debate about who to include as a subject of gossip. Some say that the people gossiped about need to be restricted to members of one's social setting (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Others (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev, 1994) have argued to include unknown people as well because, for instance, celebrities are technically 'unknown' people, or at least not part of one's social network, and are often gossiped about. Yet, even the inclusion of celebrities is not sufficient, as Ben-Ze'ev's (1994, p. 17) outlines: "[t]he objects of gossip fall into three major groups: (a) people in our immediate surroundings, (b) famous people, and (c) people whose intimate and personal lives are unique". As we will argue below, some gossip centres on the question 'what' has happened and for these forms of gossip the inclusion of complete strangers in the definition is highly relevant. The inclusion of talk about strangers is useful to study gossip in social virtual worlds, where people are put in a position in which it is easy to seek out contact with unknown others to build relations with them (Krotoski, Lyons, & Barnett, 2009).

Second, with regard to what is gossiped about, clearly not all talk about others is gossip. Gossip deals with discrepancies (Hannerz, 1967): a person behaves different from what most others do or a person behaves different from how (s)he usually behaves. To clarify with an example: in a society where most men do not wear skirts, a man wearing a skirt will be talked about. And if Lucy is known as a woman who never wears a skirt, she most probably will be gossiped about when she does wear one. Gossipers evaluate this information and thus adopt a moral framework. In this article, we follow Foster's (2004) definition and focus on the evaluative character of gossip about both known and unknown people.

Turning to the motives to gossip, the multiple functions are often summarized into: passing on information, group cohesion and protection, entertainment, and the manipulation of reputations (see Foster (2004) and Beersma & Van Kleef (2012) for an overview). Interestingly, the informative, entertainment, and social bonding uses appear to overlap with the uses listed in classical uses and gratifications research studying why people use media (see Rubin, 1983). This is of particular interest to study online, mediated gossip, as this form of gossip may then become 'informative' because of the perceived informative use of gossip and the medium by which it is transmitted. All uses of gossip have been widely studied in offline contexts and there is considerably less attention given to online environments. We first give an overview of past research, summarizing the main findings under these broadly defined uses of gossip.

2.1.1. Passing on information

First of all, knowing what is appropriate to do or say and what is not is crucial information to become and remain an accepted group-member. Gossip is an informative and resourceful tool in getting acquainted with the, often hidden, social norms of a cultural group. In its informative use, gossip functions as a 'cultural learning' device to learn how to behave to become socially accepted (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Saunders, 1999). Gossipers do not necessarily need to know the person being talked about; what this person has done and how others judge these actions takes a central position. This classifies under what De Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, and McAndrew (2007) have labelled 'strategy learning gossip', being information about 'what' happened and what gossipers can learn from this. The informative function of

¹ The data of five informants have been incorporated; however, during in-world participant observation many more residents were observed and talked to. These quick interactions gave important additional contextual and insider information, but these five informants were questioned in-depth about their experiences.

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