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Title **New thinking about gossip – as an idea whose time has come**
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Bio

Kathryn began her professional career as a nurse in London, and her doctoral research in psychology explored the characteristics and role of gossip in healthcare organizations. She has published widely in this area, and recently published a new book in the Routledge series ‘State of the art in business research’ called *Gossip, Organization and Work: A Research Overview*. Kathryn’s other areas of interest include organizational compassion, and the creation of compassionate cultures and practices. She describes herself as a practice based academic, truth teller, and boat rocker.

[Gossip is evaluative talk](#) between at least two people that can be spoken, written, or visual, and where evaluation involves judging the quality, importance or value of someone, or something. It has been part of everyday life for a very, very, long time, and can be traced back to the origins of language, which Robin Dunbar argued evolved to [enable people to gossip](#). That is to pass on socially useful information about who you could/couldn’t trust, who was a free rider, and who talked bullshit [I can tone this down if necessary!]. This type of talk produced social cohesion and alleviated social conflict. During the Middle Ages the word gossip (originally *godsib* meaning sponsor at baptism/godparent) evolved to describe women who supported other [women during childbirth](#). There was no negative meaning attached to gossip until around the time of the [European witch hunts](#) in the 16th to 18th centuries, when it became a catalyst for accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. This led to inhumane use of medieval [instruments of torture](#) such as the ‘scold’s bridle’ designed to punish and prevent women from speaking. Thus, the negative reputation and stereotype of gossip as women’s talk began.

Paradoxically, at the same time, gossip as men’s talk spread throughout the 17th and 18th-century in English coffee houses, christened [‘Penny Universities’](#). As exclusive resorts of the educated and rich, they were places where learned men (there is little evidence of women in coffee houses, unless as servants) and their male students came to demonstrate their wit and intellectual talents. Here, the myth that ‘women gossip but men have serious conversations’

was born. However, my research into [gossip and organizations](#) firmly dispels this myth, and shatters the illusion that gossip is trivial or dangerous women's talk. When interviewing men about their experience of gossip at work, they often begin by saying '*I'm not one to gossip, but ...*', and then go on at length to talk about how they use gossip strategically and politically. For example, '*it's not what you know or who you know, it's what you know about who you know*'. I have encountered many euphemisms for gossip such as 'shop talk', 'post-meeting debriefing' and 'corridor conversations'. These all reflect evaluative talk that can be spoken (e.g., face-to-face, online, or by phone), written (e.g., email, or text), or visual (e.g., ironic messages on coffee mugs like 'you don't have to be crazy to work here – we'll train you', and more recently, emojis).

While there is also a plethora of material decrying gossip as something that must be [eliminated in the workplace](#), and [books](#) advocating spiritual reasons for resisting gossip, these overlook the potential positive attributes and outcomes of gossip. To be clear, I am not advocating that all gossip is good. Far from it. There are times when gossip must be resisted and eliminated because of the potential for harm to the [reputation](#) of both individuals and organizations. [Negative gossip](#) is a form of bullying and unethical behaviour, which is detrimental to people's wellbeing, and the decision to gossip – or not – is always an ethical decision. There are also times when gossip is an expression of concern about unethical or unprofessional behaviour; for instance when there is '[common knowledge](#)' about sexual abuse, but nobody speaks up. When the topic/content of gossip is about poor practice in organizations it takes on a sentinel function, acting as an [early warning signal](#) that should be heeded rather than ignored or disregarded. Failure to attend to gossip as an early warning signal is, I suggest, equivalent to a driver knowingly ignoring a red traffic light and causing subsequent death by dangerous driving. Rather than seeing gossip as a problem to be avoided, dismissed, or eliminated, we need new thinking about gossip as an idea whose time has come.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) said in his essay [The History of a Crime](#) 'an invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come'. Gossip has undergone a slow rehabilitation since I first began researching and writing about it over 25 years ago. My most recent book [Gossip, Organization and Work](#) is published as a 'state of the art' topic in business research, and seen as a new and rapidly evolving area of inquiry. This is mirrored by the recent [Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation](#), and the recognition that gossip can be reconceptualized as an important aspect of communication and knowledge. Crucially, the pandemic has, I

suggest, also shone a spotlight on the previously hidden benefits of gossip. Almost overnight the first lockdown period removed the opportunities for the casual conversations that constitute the activity of gossip – for example, conversations in the coffee queue, and before/after meetings. This created a vacuum, and exposed the underlying [benefits and consequences](#) of gossip, which are to form social bonds, strengthen relationships, and promote cooperation. This is good gossip and is why the argument that language evolved to enable people to gossip still holds true. Future research into gossip in the post-pandemic landscape offers great opportunities to further challenge the negative myths and stereotypes of gossip that have held sway for so long. The key question for researchers now is:

How can we use the crisis to rethink ideas about gossip that are no longer fit for purpose?

(880 words)