

Talk about Talk

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Every semester, at least one student approaches me with concerns about an interaction they've had with another professor, administrator, or student. They begin by saying "I don't mean to gossip, but..." The last time this happened, a woman student was describing how her professor was slanting discussion in his classes by enforcing rigid discussion-leading formats. Another time, my partner told me about "gossip" he heard at his hospital, at the nurses' station: a doctor was dating a nurse. Both these examples were framed as gossip, but conveyed specific details about power structures: a doctor dating a nurse deeply impacts teamwork at a small hospital, and a professor slanting class discussion is an understated exercise of power.

I believe we need to consider the increasing importance of gossip as an archive, and gossip as archive-building labor. This is particularly important in the age of #MeToo, where it is accumulated "gossip" that launched the New York Times and New York Post articles exposing the widespread abuse of women. Journalists repeatedly described Harvey Weinstein's abuse of women as an "open secret," where women used "gossip" to warn and protect each other. And so my goal today is to think through, with all of you, about what gossip is. In some case, it can be unhelpful – particularly when using negativity as a shortcut to bond with other individuals. But in these cases, it is how individuals without much power – my student, the nurses, the women Weinstein abused – share information about power. We use the term gossip negatively, to diminish such information-sharing networks. Today, I want us to reimagine gossip as archive-formation. To gossip is to create an external archive, and when someone else shares a similar experience, that archive, that person, can connect the dots and observe a pattern. This is particularly important when communicating information about microaggressions, which are largely invisible and often unconscious.

Additionally, I argue that we carefully consider when information is *not* considered gossip. It's worth interrogating communication that is organizationally sanctioned: memos, company emails, and newsletters. How does information traverse the line from gossip to "organizational communication?" It is worth considering how sexual misconduct allegations in academia – and recently here at UT – are addressed, first through gossip and eventually through establishment-sanctioned communication, i.e. Title IX complaints. However, such formalization of gossip (i.e., the filing of a Title IX grievance or lawsuit) relies on gossip for evidence. One reason the women who Donald Trump assaulted were considered "credible" is because journalists "verified" that they confided in their friends immediately after their assaults. In these ways, gossip provides the labor necessary for social justice.

Finally, I make this argument keeping in mind the increasing precarity of the academic labor market and the increased feminization and materially-expressed devaluation of

academic labor in general. The feminization of labor and the rhetorical construction of gossip converge to dictate how academics navigate the job market by relying on gossip. The feminization of labor selects particular labor to remain uncompensated, i.e. domestic labor and adjunct labor. The rhetorical construction of gossip, meanwhile, is aligned with bodies performing feminized labor: gossip is aligned with women and the “domestic” realm; adjuncts, meanwhile, who suffer exploitation through the removal of health benefits and erasure of their labor, rarely have their feedback formally solicited by universities and are rarely *trained* formally by universities. At my own institution, adjuncts are trained informally “over coffee” by departing adjuncts. My aim is to consider how aligning gossip with the private sphere and feminized bodies makes it “naturally” uncompensated, but also dislodges it as a form of labor, even as it is used as a tool to navigate opportunities for compensated labor.