

Finding Truth Behind Backs and Through Grapevines: On the Epistemology and Ethics of Gossip and Rumor

Margaret CUONZO* 

ABSTRACT. Stroll through any office party, social gathering, or school cafeteria, and you are likely to hear people engaging in what you would quickly and accurately label “gossip,” perhaps by noticing that someone who is not present is being discussed in a way that you imagine the person who is the subject of the discussion wouldn’t appreciate. You will often hear, in similar contexts, rumors being spread using a standard, “I heard that...” as a kind of disclaimer regarding the truth of the statement that was heard. Gossip has a “behind the back” quality that other types of conversation do not. A rumor, on the other hand, isn’t itself an activity, but a claim that gets passed from person to person with no one taking responsibility for the truth of the claim. “I heard that...” or even, “I’m not certain about this, but I heard...” are often said before someone transmits a rumor to another person. Taking something passed “through the grapevine” of multiple speakers as true has well-known perils.

This piece discusses the natures of rumor and gossip, how they function, and what their consequences are. Two main concerns are (a) the extent to which we have the epistemic justification to believe rumors and gossip, and (b) the ethical implications of spreading rumors and engaging in gossip. I’ll argue that, with respect to epistemological justification, gossip is on better footing than rumor. One of the reasons for this is that gossip often functions as a way of spreading truths that the subject of the gossip would not want spread. Rumors, on the other hand, are prefaced with a disclaimer that indicates that the claim being spread is not first-hand information, thus making its truth inherently questionable. Lastly, with respect to their ethical implications, I’ll argue that the “behind the back” quality of gossip makes it inherently unethical, but that spreading rumors is sometimes ethically justified, or even required, as when one hears of a dangerous situation and warns others “just in case.”

Keywords: rumor, gossip, truth, disclaimer, behind-the-back

* CUNY The Graduate Center, Long Island University, New York, USA, mcuonzo@gmail.com



Introduction

Stroll through any office party, social gathering, or school cafeteria, and you are likely to hear people engaging in what you would quickly and accurately label “gossip,” perhaps by noticing that someone who is not present is being discussed in a way that you imagine the person who is the subject of the gossip wouldn’t appreciate. You will often hear, in similar contexts, rumors being spread using a standard, “I heard that...” as a kind of disclaimer regarding the truth of the statement that was heard. Gossip has a “behind the back” quality that other types of conversation do not. A rumor, on the other hand, is a claim that gets passed from person to person with no one taking responsibility for the truth of the claim. “I heard that...” or even, “I’m not certain about this, but I heard...” are often said before someone transmits a rumor to another person. Taking something passed “through the grapevine” of multiple speakers as true has well-known perils. Below is a comparative analysis of gossip and rumor as two ways for finding truth. “Finding truth” in this context is not meant to conflate epistemological and semantic notions but rather highlight that, when rumors are spread and gossip takes place, standards for ethical and epistemological justification shift. Neither gossiping nor spreading rumor is a totally acceptable method for passing along, or obtaining, truth, yet the reasons for this differ. I will conclude that, with respect to epistemological justification, gossip is on better footing than rumor. One of the reasons for this is that gossip often functions as a way of spreading claims that the subject of the gossip would not want to be spread. These claims may nevertheless be true and there may be good evidence to show this. Rumors, on the other hand, are prefaced with a disclaimer that indicates that the claim being spread is not first-hand information, thus making the rumor’s truth inherently questionable. Lastly, with respect to their ethical implications, I’ll conclude that the “behind the back” quality of gossip makes it inherently unethical, but that spreading rumors is sometimes ethically justified, or even required, as when one hears of a dangerous situation and warns others “just in case.” Once I have shown gossip to be primarily suspect in terms of morality, and rumor to be primarily suspect in terms of its epistemic justification, I, lastly, suggest ways that the well-known dangers of engaging in these two forms of communication might be minimized.

Gossip and Rumor as Speech Acts and as Claims

It will be helpful to begin by distinguishing the speech acts accomplished by gossiping and spreading rumors, as well as the claims that are made through gossip and rumor. The chart below illustrates this.

Table 1. Gossip and Rumor-Spread as Speech Acts and Claims

	Speech Act	Claim
Gossip	Roughly, the act of making a claim about a person in which the speaker is disinclined to speak with the subject of the gossip present.	Piece of Gossip: Claim about subject of gossiping made by the speaker
Rumor	The repetition of a claim from person to person with no person taking "epistemic responsibility" for the claim.	Rumor: Claim which is passed from person to person.

Gossip

Starting with speech acts, when we look at the activity of gossiping, we'll see that there are certain rules underlying what counts as an act of gossiping. I have discussed this previously in an essay on gossip in the *Journal of Social Philosophy* (Cuonzo 2008). Briefly, the activity of gossiping is constrained by certain conditions. For example, gossip cannot be about inanimate objects. I can gossip about how much someone paid for a cup, how much a person drank from a cup, or why someone stole a cup, but not the cup itself. Even when encountering an offensive image or sentiment on a cup, it is the person who would buy or create such a cup that would be the subject of the gossip, not the cup itself. That this is so indicates a central feature of the activity of gossiping, namely, that there is a person who is the subject of the gossip whose awareness of the activity the participants in gossip would like to avoid. In that 2008 paper, I gave the following definition of gossip:

Where A, B, and C refer to distinct persons,
In uttering p, A gossips to B about C if, and only if, (i) A believes that C would not like A to reveal the information contained in p to B; (ii) A would be disinclined to utter p to B with C present; (iii) A believes that uttering p will be pleasurable to A and/or B; and (iv) p contains information about C.

There's a lot to unpack here. Let me first indicate that I have something more specific in mind than a definition offered by Kelsey McKinney in a recent popular and entertaining book on gossip, *You Didn't Hear This From Me* (2025). McKinney defines gossip as "one person talking to another about someone who isn't present" (2). This is too broad a definition to be meaningful. We can speak about people who are not present without gossiping. I can, for example, send a message from one person to another in which I discuss what the sender of the message wants me to convey about the sender to the hearer. For example, Karen may want me to tell Jamie that she is sorry about what happened the previous day. In conveying Karen's message, I'm not gossiping about Karen, but fulfilling a request. This, to my mind, is not gossip.

Simplifying my old definition a bit, I believe there are at least three features that are central to gossip. (i) A utters to B a claim about C (this conforms to McKinney's definition); (ii) A would be disinclined to utter p with C present. This gives gossip its "behind-the back" quality and indicates a kind of dishonesty, or at the very least, a lack of transparency on the part of the speaker and hearer; and (iii) A believes that A's utterance will produce pleasure in A and/or B. This last element is needed to separate gossip from other activities that would simply be private communications about third parties.

There is a very special kind of pleasure that gossip brings. It was once described as "Belgian Chocolate for the Universal Mind" in a Ph.D. dissertation (DeBacker, Ghent, 2005) and McKinney evokes it when describing the feeling when someone leans towards someone and says in a hushed tone, "You're not going to believe this...". Robin Dunbar and others argue that the evolutionary role of gossip was as a means of substitute "grooming" in order to form alliances (1996). Rather than devoting long hours to forming alliances through grooming individuals, our evolutionary ancestors developed language to facilitate alliances and maintain their place in the social hierarchy, according to this view. It makes sense, then, that gossip provides a special pleasure associated with social connection between speaker and hearer. Though it is hard to describe this pleasure clearly, recent studies provide a more nuanced view of the nature and biological underpinnings of the pleasure of gossip. Brondino et al (2017), for example, show that the speech act of gossiping is associated with increased levels of oxytocin levels in the brain, indicating a rise in feelings of trust and social bonding, while Rudnicki et al (2023) don't find that there is a decrease in the stress-related hormone cortisol, indicating that the speech act seems not to reduce stress levels, though they acknowledge that those who gossip a good deal tend to have lower cortisol levels. Given Dunbar's theory, it makes sense that a pleasure associated with social connection is brought about by gossip, even though this may not result in reduced stress levels.

This pleasurable connection, though, also provides grounds for loosening social connections with the individual who is the subject of the gossip. The speaker is being deceptive, not of the hearer, but of the subject in the fact that the speaker wants to keep the speaker's claims about the subject hidden. The speaker (A) would not share the claim with the hearer (B) with the subject (C) present. Therefore, while perhaps justified when it is the only means to convey important information, gossip is inherently morally questionable. This follows from (ii), the behind-the-back nature of the communication.

Some philosophical analyses of gossip, such as the articles in *Good Gossip* (Goodman et al 1994) attempt to ethically justify gossip on grounds that it is often associated with those with less power. For example, graduate students may warn

each other against being alone with a certain professor. The line of argument contends that gossip in such cases protects those with less power from the more powerful and is therefore morally acceptable. I concur about this particular case only because of the limited options the graduate students have to share information without negative consequences. That is, it is *only* justified because of the limited options of the speaker and hearer. Like all cases where justification for avoiding a small wrong is outweighed by the negative consequences of not engaging in the wrong, gossip may be justified given the circumstances. This, however, does nothing to change the inherent nature of gossip as ethically questionable.

I submit that the speaker of the gossip can and often does have direct evidence for the claim being made. For example, if A, B, and C are all coworkers, A might have seen C doing something untoward, like getting high and taking off all their clothes. A gossips to B when A recounts C's actions to B but would not do so if C were present at the time of the speech act. Notice A has seen with A's own eyes the untoward action. The evidence is not indirect, but rather secret. A might even have taken a cellphone picture of the C engaged in the activity. So, while morally questionable, gossip is not inherently suspect epistemologically. Indeed, the best gossips have reliable information about their subjects.

Rumor

A rumor, on the other hand, by definition lacks direct evidence. Consider the following as a rough definition of *rumor*: *A claim that is passed from person to person without the speaker taking "epistemic responsibility" for the claim, that is, without providing clear evidence other than the testimony of someone else.* It's the evidential basis of rumor that is its main problem. This isn't to say that people don't spread rumors through malice. They do, of course. And this also isn't to say that gossip and spreading rumors can't occur at the same time, as when someone spreads a rumor about someone, that is, spreads a claim about someone prefaced with "I heard that..." and also gossips, that is, makes the statement despite being disinclined to spread the rumor with the subject present.

It is not a precondition for spreading rumor that there is some kind of malice involved. Indeed, there are many instances in which we might be morally obliged to spread a rumor. Say, for example, Pat is about to enter the building where Pat teaches, and someone comes up to Pat and says, "I really don't know if this is true, but someone just told me that he heard that there is an active shooter in the building." This brings up the issue of how reliable the testimony of others is, so let's assume that the claim is being passed on by people Pat doesn't know. While Pat is trying to figure out what is going on, Pat notices a colleague who is walking toward

the building on her way to teach. Pat might, out of concern for the colleague, ask her to consider this possibility, even though Pat has no evidence for the claim other than the random person's saying it. I submit that Pat's spreading of the rumor is not merely permissible, but obligatory.

In addition to cases like Pat's, an examination of the two central features of rumor indicates that there nothing inherently immoral about spreading a rumor.

First Central Concept of Rumor: Spread

The first central feature of rumor is spread, that is, the activity of passing on the claim. Spread has been measured as the number of persons receiving and repeating the claim, and the speed at which this passing and repetition occurs. Spread can occur rapidly or slowly. Some mathematicians have modeled the spread of rumors based on epidemiological models of the spread of disease. Taking rumor to be "a disease of the mind," the idea is to model how a rumor "infects" someone and how that person could pass it on, or not (Nekovee et al, 2007). In the Nekovee et al model, for example, the model considers a population of N individuals and, like models that subdivide the populations into those who spread a disease, become exposed, and become immune, they divide the population into rumor spreaders, ignorants, and rumor stiflers. Contact between the individuals takes place in a network $G = (V, E)$, in which V denotes the vertices of the network, and E denotes the edges of the network. Two rules govern the contacts between individuals.

- Whenever a spreader contacts an ignorant, the ignorant becomes a spreader at a rate λ .
- When a spreader contacts another spreader or a stifier the initiating spreader becomes a stifier at a rate α .

In the above, the first rule models the tendency of individuals to accept a rumor only with a certain probability which, loosely speaking, depends on the urgency or credibility of a rumor. The second rule, on the other hand, models the tendency of individuals to lose interest in spreading a rumor when they learn, through contacts with others, that the rumor has become stale news or is false.

The modeling of rumor spread using a similar structure to epidemiological models invites certain criticisms. One is that treating rumor spread as a "disease of the mind" doesn't allow for the epistemic value that rumors have. People want to know the rumors. They take an interest in them, as we'll see below, perhaps based on their own interests. They may seek them out, as opposed to those who can be infected with disease. Additionally, there are some issues with the parameters of the present model. The first rule, "Whenever a spreader contacts an ignorant, the ignorant becomes an spreader at a rate λ ," is meant to model "the tendency of

individuals to accept a rumour only with a certain probability which, loosely speaking, depends on the urgency or credibility of a rumour" (Nekovee et al 2007). However, the credibility and tendency to accept are not necessarily related. As has been discussed much in the psychological literature of rumor spread, tendency to spread is often a function of the hearer's previously held beliefs rather than the credibility of the rumor (cf. Sunstein 14-19).

Two earlier researchers didn't speak of "spread" but rather the "strength" of a rumor, though strength was indicative of how fast and wide a rumor would spread. Allport and Postman (1948), while working on quelling rumors during WWII, held in their basic law of rumor that the "strength" of rumor, or how likely it was to spread quickly and to many persons, was determined by (a) the importance of the topic to those involved and (b) the ambiguity of the evidence. The example involving Pat and the rumor about the shooter is an example of a strong rumor. Pat's rumor is important as there is great danger if there is an active shooter in the building, and the evidence for the claim is ambiguous. However, the Allport/Postman account invites the objection that rumors are often spread despite having little importance for the parties engaged in spreading the rumors. For example, rumors about celebrities often have little to no impact on the spreaders of the rumors. Yet, they are often spread quite quickly and quite far. Perhaps the notion of "importance" can be substituted with a more general term like "interest." While the latest rumor about a celebrity's life may not be important in the sense of altering the rumor-spreaders' lives, the interest taken in the rumors certainly leads to quicker and greater spread. Both the epidemiological models and the basic law of rumor are flawed, however both do emphasize the centrality of spread to the nature of rumor. And in neither is there anything to indicate that spreading the rumor need be done maliciously or with any attempt on the part of the speakers to harm the hearers.

Second Central Concept of Rumor: The Disclaimer

The second central concept is the epistemic disclaimer. The activity isn't to necessarily speak behind someone's back, though this might happen, but rather to pass a claim from person to person without taking responsibility for having direct evidence. Whether directly stated or implied, there is always a disclaimer with respect to the truth of rumors. Typical ones include, "I heard that..." "I read that..." "So and so said that..." "A blog post says that..." And so on. The passing of the buck with respect to evidence is indicative that the claim is coming from the speaker without there being any direct evidence provided. Notice that here, too, there is nothing inherently unethical about the spreading of the claims. Indeed the disclaimer is itself an action that indicates a certain transparency on the part of the speaker. The disclaimer indicates that the speaker is upfront about the speaker's lack of evidence.

Conclusions about Gossip and Rumor

Getting back to the chart distinguishing gossip and rumor in terms of their speech acts and the nature of their claims, the morality of the speech act is questionable for gossip, but not rumor, however the epistemological issues are more serious for rumor than gossip.

Table 2. Conclusions About Gossip and Rumor

	Speech Act	Claim
Gossip	Roughly, the act of making claim about a person in which the speaker is disinclined to speak with the person present. INHERENTLY MORALLY QUESTIONABLE	Piece of Gossip: Claim about subject of gossiping made by the speaker. NOT INHERENTLY EPISTEMICALLY QUESTIONABLE
Rumor	The repetition of rumor from person to person with no person taking "epistemic responsibility" for the claim. NOT INHERENTLY MORALLY QUESTIONABLE	Rumor: Claim which is passed from person to person. INHERENTLY EPISTEMICALLY QUESTIONABLE

To sum up, the activity of rumor spread involves the chain of conveyance, hence the ubiquitous metaphor of hearing things "through the grapevine." Notice that there is nothing inherently morally suspect in a chain of conveyance. What is suspect, though, is the evidence for the claim. This is why I believe that rumor's main issue is not a moral one, though rumors can do great harm, but rather an epistemological one. Gossip, on the other hand, is primarily a moral problem, due to inherent deception, not, ironically, of the hearer, but of the person who is the subject of the gossip.

Strategies for Preventing the Negative Aspects of Gossip and Rumor-Spread

The account just given can provide some guidelines for avoiding the negative consequences that result from gossip and rumor-spread. These suggestions are offered in the spirit of how to avoid both the inferential and ethical pitfalls that make these two phenomena so prevalent. Just as informal fallacies like *ad misericordiam* (appeal to pity) result from the way human beings are motivated by forces that go beyond logic proper, gossip and spreading rumor have their roots beyond purely logical inference.

Since a central feature of gossip is its behind-the-back quality, one way to avoid gossip is for the subject of the gossip, that is, C in the definition, to be present regularly and maintain awareness of what is being said and by whom. This is obviously not foolproof. I had a colleague who heard I was working on gossip, and I gave her that advice. She was the subject of gossip and wasn't around much to

address the issue and provide counterevidence. So, my suggestion was to make her presence felt more regularly. Also, if we'd like to self-regulate our use of gossip, we might ask ourselves if we'd be inclined to say this if the subject of our claims were present. Social psychological studies of gossip have indicated that gossip is often a means of bonding at the expense of the subject and often meant to lower the subject's social status in a group (Dunbar 2005). Thus, it is more common among colleagues and in circumstances where there are hierarchies, whether social (as in high school) or in other situations, such as work. That this is so provides some way of anticipating when gossip is more likely to occur and to be on guard.

And since rumor has been shown to be inherently weak in terms of evidence, the easiest way to address the problems raised by their spread is to keep this in mind. For example, taking degrees of belief as a tool here, rumors should always have low initial degrees of credence until evidence is provided. Taking us away from straightforward philosophy, it has been shown repeatedly that people are more likely to believe rumors that validate previously held beliefs, no matter how unlikely the rumor is (Sunstein 2014, 14-19). I've spent some time at the WWII Rumor Project archive at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, USA, looking at documentation about rumors during that period. One common theme was that rumors tend to be believed and spread by those with particular biases. As a result, rumors often were about groups that were already the subject of discrimination and bias. The same rumor was often used multiple times and interchanged groups. For example, one rumor took the form "The X are making tons of money on the war," where X referred to any group that the hearers were predisposed against: the Jews, the Capitalists, and so on. Another common theme was, "The X are working for the enemy," where the X were black Americans, immigrants, and so on. To self-regulate, people must be particularly aware that they are more likely to believe rumors that confirm their own biases. The analogy with the informal fallacies here is particularly important. Study of informal fallacies like bifurcation (either/or fallacy) is meant to illustrate how human beings can fall prey to believing that an either/or claim (for example, "You're either for me or against me") does not admit of other options (for example, you're neutral). Study of rumors and their spread shows that one's own preconceived ideas make one more vulnerable to believing rumors without sufficient evidence.

Conclusions

In sum, gossip is an inherently moral problem derived from its behind-the-back quality and is best addressed through transparency. While we may find truth in gossiping, the means through which we obtain it is morally suspect. This is so even

when, due to lack of options, we are justified in gossiping about more powerful people, such as in the case of the sexual harasser mentioned earlier. Rumor, on the other hand, is an inherently epistemological issue and is best addressed via treating with skepticism claims that are far removed from any direct evidence. However, there may be occasions, like the active shooter example, when we must acknowledge the lack of evidence for the truth of the claim but alter our behavior "just in case." Both have their pitfalls, yet both admit of cases when they are useful despite these pitfalls.

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