

Case Study: Gossip as Communication System

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Gossip is a historically maligned form of communication, frequently cast as idle, feminized chatter in contrast to the masculine public sphere. But gossip's bad reputation speaks to its power. Through its rapid spread and the instability of its content, gossip, as public secret, calls into question established social hierarchies and ways of knowing. Perhaps the oldest form of 'social networking,' gossip's ubiquity is made more apparent today by viral scandals and security breaches—though its flows are now more constrained by the networks of power it bristles against. A growing chorus of artists, scholars and writers have recognized gossip's significance and investigated it as a positive social force—one whose work lies not in fixing truths but in performing the daily maintenance of our interpersonal relationships.

In her essay '[Witch-Hunt](#),' for *Tank* magazine, artist Hannah Black frames gossip both as a language of female resistance and as an indispensable form of emotional labor. She writes: "Hatred of gossip is hatred of women talking to each other—it is generally women who do this work of love.... Communities of gossips nurse each other through the degradations that partners, bosses and families inflict on us." For marginalized people, gossip has a dual function: it works to both affirm communal bonds and unsettle the positions of those in power.

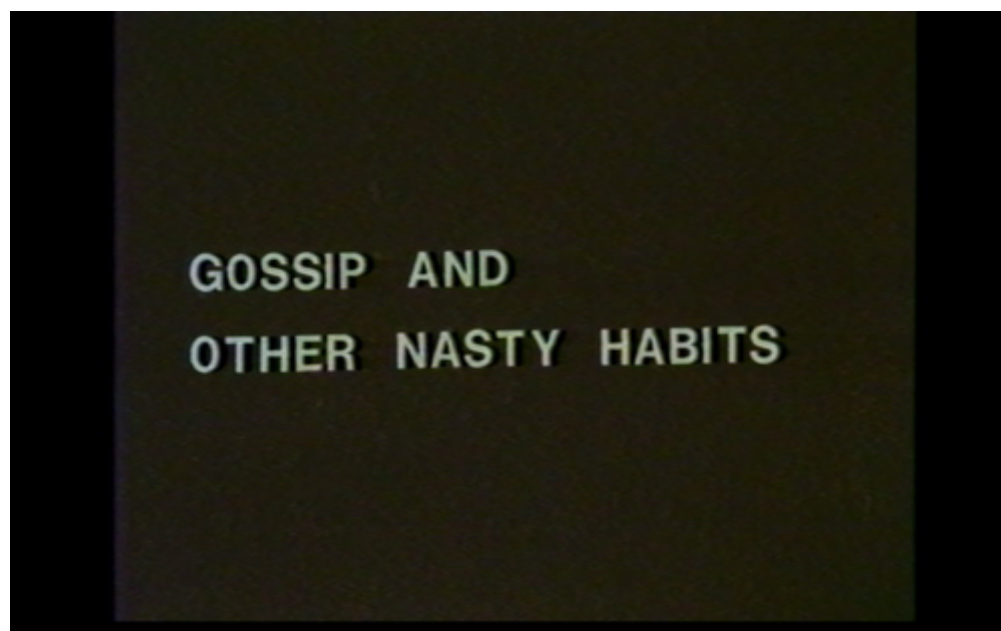
Architect and scholar Keller Easterling also examines the ways that gossip and rumor can function as destabilizing forces in her book [Extrastatecraft](#). She notes their effects on politics, citing the impact of the false rumor that Barack Obama is a Muslim. For Easterling, the content of gossip is less significant than the way that content behaves; she writes, "what must be designed is not only the content, but also the bounce of the rumor—its active forms."

In [anthropological studies](#) during the 1960s and 1970s, a focus on gossip and rumor emphasized the ways that information is transmitted in social networks, shifting the field away from a focus on 'universal' social structures. These network-based studies drew a

variety of conclusions. For instance, Nate Epstein's 1969 study of gossip within an African township examined how it secured the social standing of elite members of the society. Writing in 1967, Robert Paine defined gossip as 'information management': a mode of informal communication leveraged to advance and protect individual interests.

These anthropological studies were a key inspiration for Ulises Carrión's 1981 work *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*. In the preliminary notes to the project, Carrión states that his goal is 'not gossip as art, but art as gossip.' He recruited ten collaborators to spread several bits of concocted gossip about himself throughout the city of Amsterdam over the course of a few months; the collaborators were given notebooks in which to record their findings and track the spread of the gossip. Interestingly, Carrión's collaborators reported difficulty in spreading the gossip—either because it was not believable, because it might be upsetting, or because they simply forgot to pass it on.

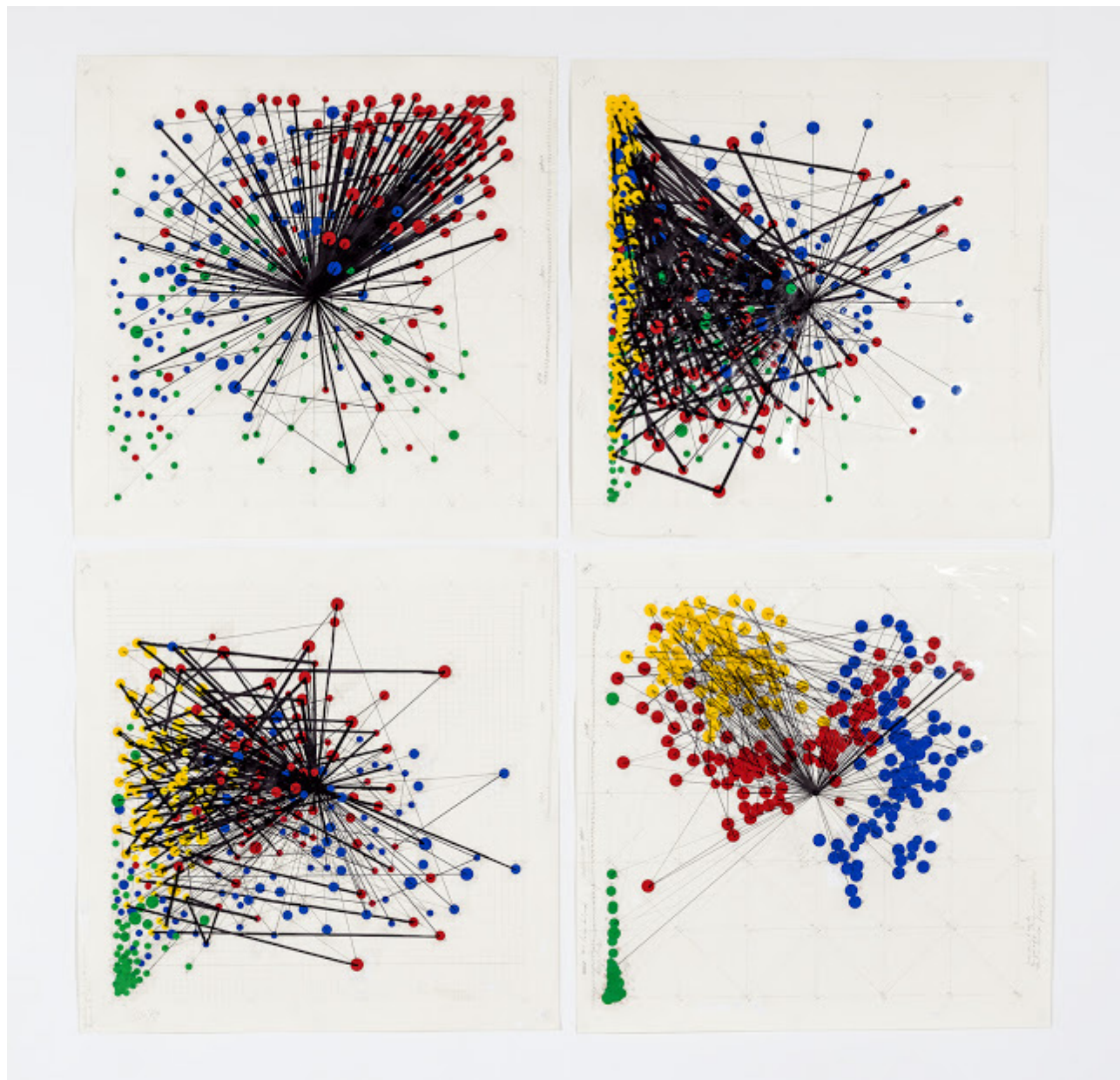
Carrión presented the results of his experiment in an academic-style lecture at the University of Amsterdam, intermingling semiotic and scholarly theories with the recounting of Hollywood scandals. The seriousness of the format was intended to contrast the supposed frivolity of the topic at hand. He defined gossip as an erratic, informal and collectively-created communication system that transcends the limitations of the individual artist and the artistic work. While such a concept of "art as gossip" might seem endemic to our current context of pervasive social networks, it was equally relevant to Carrión's era, in which communications technologies—from video cameras to the first personal computers—were rapidly evolving. Likewise, the international network of Mail Art functioned as an expansive alternative to the gallery system in the 1970s and early 1980s.



Carrión's work on gossip is echoed by other artists' investigations, in which gossip frequently functions as a tactic, rather than an object of study. Lee Lozano, who famously 'dropped out' of the art world in 1969, juxtaposed informal communication to the strictures of the gallery system with her *Dialogue Piece* of that same year. Lozano invited her interlocutors—friends with whom she would have otherwise interacted in public art settings—to have private dialogues in her loft. The informal and ephemeral nature of these chats contrasted with the ways discourse is leveraged for social capital in institutional settings. Lozano stated that the dialogues were not intended as 'works,' but as joyous social occasions in their own right.

In 2013, the artist and author Pablo Helguera invited close family, friends and professional contacts, as well as 25 attendees of the work's opening, to participate in his piece *Vita Vel Regula*, a work that also uses personal communication as a disseminating force. Translated into English as *The Rules Of Life*, the piece is a game in which participants were given sealed envelopes with specific opening dates and instructions. Slated to end in 2097, the piece's extended timeframe subverts the public ritual of gallery display by deferring the unveiling of the sealed, personalized secrets. It also calls into question the longevity of social networks at a time when so much communication is predicated on immediacy.

Contemporary Swiss artist Ramaya Tegegne has explored gossip in a number of projects, such as the visual essay and performance series *Bzzz Bzzz Bzzz (2014-2017)* and the recent zine *Liquid Autist*. The zine takes its title from a 2013 exhibition also called *Liquid Autist*, organized by artist-curator Daniel Keller, that included only male artists (including Keller himself). The show sparked a lengthy Facebook debate from an all-female artists' Facebook group that challenged the show's blatant exclusiveness. Tegegne translated screenshots of the thread into a zine for a 2017 exhibition and performance at *First Continent Gallery* in Baltimore, thus documenting and recirculating an intellectually thorny and compelling instance of 'callout culture' within the art world. This outrage-fueled gossip is an effective means of critiquing oppression and seeking visibility, but callout culture is a double-edged sword: It often bolsters a fragmented political culture in which blocking usurps consensus as an endpoint.



In a piece entitled *Un Diagrama Familiar*, the artist and journalist Jaime Serra stuck to the interactions of his personal network, using data to construct a portrait of the evolution of his family's relationships over time. Serra adopted the visual language of infographics to map the daily communications of his immediate family between 2011 and 2014. The X and Y axes in the graphic indicate emotional vs. intellectual communication, and the thickness of the lines indicate the length of the interaction.

Diagrams also figure into Carrión's examination of gossip. In one of the most unique aspects of *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*, a series of hand-drawn charts distinguish gossip from related forms of communication, like rumor, scandal, and slander. In one series, he defines gossip as an information chain, while rumor is defined by multiple movement, scandal by growing intensity, and slander by a definite target. Another

series of diagrams examines the directionality of each information structure: gossip displays a free evolution, rumor shows chaotic progress, scandal is marked by intensity radiation, and slander is a concentrated effort. A further series depicts the four modes metaphorically: gossip as undulating reference, rumor as rotating joint, scandal as positive weight, and slander as precision bomb.

Carrión lifts the diagrammatic presentation mode from the social sciences in order to perform a poetic and open-ended investigation of informal communication systems. However, Carrión's neat taxonomy of gossip may lose relevance today, as digital networks collapse distinctions between private chatter and public broadcasting while rapidly intensifying information's flow. Gossip has always functioned as a making-public of private information, but these indiscretions are now not only circulated among peers, they are also surveilled and archived by systems far beyond our reach. The pleasure in gossip's telling had been accompanied, if not by a certainty of its destination, at least by a knowledge of its relative ephemerality. Gossip's record now lies not in marginalia but in server farms.

Today, the decentralized and overlapping structure of digital information, ensnared by dominant corporate platforms and content-promoting algorithms, is a far cry from the person-to-person whispering implied by Carrión's diagrams. The term 'gossip' has perhaps even been replaced by counterpart digital-native buzzwords such as 'fake news' and 'viral content.' Similarly, the troll has emerged as a toxic—and stereotypically male—breed of online gossip; a troll's primary weapons are his abilities to disrupt discourse and circulate shame. Meanwhile, callout culture has arisen as a powerful but contested form of resistance on social media for marginalized communities. The same incendiary tone of callouts is used as a lure in countless clickbait articles, reflecting a media ecology in which the performative work of online activism and the profit-seeking motives of content farms enter into a tightening feedback loop. Both trolling and callouts reflect a blurring of gossip into scandal in online environments.

For artists such as Lozano, Carrión, and Helguera, gossip's intimate networks functioned as an 'outside' to the codified discourses of commercial, political, or artistic institutions. This outsider status has for centuries secured gossip's power to subvert established knowledge and to bind marginalized communities. As gossip becomes deeply embedded within techno-capitalist information flows, it loses its outsider status, but not its radical potential. Gossip, slander, and other impolite forms have woven themselves into the heart of today's strange geopolitics, and may produce as-yet-unforeseen effects. Such an environment demands fluency both in performing gossip and in interpreting it.

Sarah Hamerman is an art librarian and writer based in Brooklyn, NY. She currently works at the MoMA Library and the Whitney Museum Library.