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Pssst, you're a natural gossip

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Idle chat and text messaging are modern curses, right? Wrong, says Simon Blackburn, they are simply 21st-century versions of ancient rituals. OhmyGod

Are changes in communication altering, for the worse, our precious human relationships? Does the medium drown, distort, cheapen, corrupt and nullify the message? Can a quick text take the place of a look, a bunch of roses, or even a sonnet? Are young people becoming increasingly cocooned in a world without real communication, the virtual world in which they meet only the electronic traces of friends and lovers, by contrast with which the real thing is increasingly irrelevant or despised? Here is a nice bouquet of questions posed so as to be unanswerable, shot out one after the other before dull analysis might dam the torrent, rather like an interview on Radio 4's Today programme. Still, to parents worried about their children's social lives and social skills, they point to a real concern.

Fortunately, as so often happens, social science can come galloping to the rescue. According to the Social Issues Research Centre, a fair amount is known about mobile phone communication. And the breaking news is that by far the bulk of it is gossip. Furthermore, men gossip just as much as women, which is very surprising, given (their finding, not mine) that only women are skilled at the essential virtue of a gossip, which is, as speaker, to invest every triviality with a sense of drama that would have been the envy of Sarah Bernhardt, and as listener to give copious feedback, shrieking in that satisfactory way that so soothes the lives of train travellers. Men, less skilled or perhaps more worldly wise, but in any case bearing out Simon Baron-Cohen's thesis that the male brain is halfway to the autistic brain, apparently manage the same amount of gossip but more solipsistically, without either the dramatics or the reaction from their male audience. OhmyGod.

But evolutionary psychology (roughly, pop psychology) has the good news. We are natural gossips. We evolved for it, way back on the savannah, when our brains were condensing from out of the primal soup and there was practically nothing else to do. We evolved for gossip because it is good for us. It is therapeutic. It is the next best thing to picking fleas off each other. With it we groom, bond, display status, reciprocate favours, overcome shyness, become insiders and generally bed ourselves into our roles as the world's brainiest chimpanzees. And with mobile gossip young people can practise communication without the horrible agonies of being seen to blush or cry. Some hypothesise that human language itself evolved not in order to communicate information, but to facilitate gossip. But guesses are cheap, and this one fits rather badly with the equally well-promoted hypothesis that female sexual selection is responsible for driving male traits such as musicality and artistic skill. For one would then have expected an arms race in which men became ever better gossips, ever more inventive and fascinating and dramatic, which, as we have just seen, is not the case. In fact, even when men gossip it is often apparently about football players, which is probably not the ideal way to capture the adoration of the questing female. But while falsifiability is the famous Popperian hallmark of science, it is not the distinguishing feature of this version of it. The speculation, or guess, that gossip rather than information drove human evolution is apt to puzzle philosophers of language. The information content in gossip may be fairly trashy, and much of it best taken with a pinch of salt, but still, it purports to be information. If I could not communicate the sober information that there is a bear behind the rock over there, then neither could I communicate the breathless gossip that Sharon and Harry are behind the rock over there.

Logically, gossip has to be downwind of sober intention to tell of things and facts, because it cannot exist without presupposing that intention.

Only then can it float free. The gossip may not even care whether her story is believed, provided she obtains the right rewards of friendship and inclusion for telling it. But she is drawing on the resources of truth-telling all the same, just as the players acting a murder need the audience to know what a real murder is. When the gossip talks of Madge's hair, she needs her hearers to know who Madge is and what hair is, each of which they will have been shown in truthful interchanges.

Perhaps the electronic tidal wave has engulfed even that much contact with reality. Apparently a fair proportion of mobile phone gossip concerns celebrities, and for these to act as foci for gossip, they clearly do not need to exist, any more than God does in order to be the target of prayer and the excuse for bad behaviour. Indeed, I now realise that I should not have used the name "Madge" in the last paragraph, since I believe it is the nickname for just such a potentially absent deity. The confusion between an actor and the role, the blurring of the line between a virtual and an actual reality, is a well-attested phenomenon, but I find it hard to blame the modern world for it. We could more charitably put it down to the extraordinary power of fiction over the human mind - our mobile imaginations, as it were. The Church has always understood it well enough, and the outpouring of grief when a character in a soap opera is killed off, or the joy when they have a baby, surely should not surprise the celebrants of Easter and Christmas. Fictions engage us. That supreme focus of national identity and romantic nostalgia, the kilt, was only created in anything like its present form by an English ironmaster, Thomas Rawlinson, in the second quarter of the 18th century, unfortunately just in time for it to be banned, only to be resurrected a few years later as infinitely more ancient and more meaningful. Collective hallucinations do far more damage in the worlds of politics and religion than they do by ruling the world of the mobile phone. Still, perhaps we should worry about young people immersing themselves in them, since that may make them all the more receptive to the versions emanating from Washington or Westminster. I incline to the other view, that by practising scepticism they are adapting themselves to that world better than their elders who passively took what they were told from newspapers and television. An apprenticeship distinguishing truth from lies when reading Shazza's texts in the playground break is surely an ideal preparation for encounters with similar texts from Alastair Campbell or MI6.

Should we fear that all the buzzing minutiae prevent young people from reading better things? Here I think we should remember that Plato, for one, was very much down on reading. At the end of the dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates launches a tirade against it, nicely echoed by Robert Louis Stevenson somewhat later: "Talk is fluid, tentative, continually 'in further search and progress'; while written words remain fixed, become idols even to the writer, found wooden dogmatisms, and preserve flies of obvious error in the amber of the truth." But the contrast is not between writing and reading on the one hand and speaking on the other. There is no necessary difference between creating a text and creating a noise. In the world of the text message, text is fluid, tentative and unlikely to preserve flies of obvious error in the amber of truth, not just because there may be rather little amber about, but because not much is preserved.

The ephemeral, mind-engaging quality of talk that so impressed Plato and Stevenson now belongs to text as well. If they are right, we should herald this as an improvement. So I am fairly relaxed about the environment of drivel that surrounds us all.

On the other hand, I do take seriously the danger that besets us on the roads, since there is real danger in mobile phone use, with or without hands, while driving. In fact my modest proposal would be that only children should be licensed for using mobile technology. When they reach the age at which they can hold of a driving licence, their mobiles would be handed in to proper disposal centres, where they would be shipped for free distribution to our economic competitors, who would promptly succumb to the lure of gossip instead of working, and fall behind us. Being free of a mobile would rapidly become a sign of maturity, like smoking or drinking, and gradually the age at which teenagers started voluntarily surrendering the things would start to fall. It would no longer be cool to be more than very young and still use one. Gradually mobile phone masts would rot, and the countryside would start to look clean again. Gossip would be confined to the places where it should be found, such as hairdressers or cafés. The only downside that I can see is that there would then arrive an even more virulent rash of Starbucks.

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