

Gossip

What is the difference between news, which people are proud to exhibit their knowledge about, and gossip, which people are embarrassed about when they get caught reading or discussing it by non-gossipers? Knowing what's going on in other countries makes you an up-to-date intellectual, while knowing what's going on in the neighborhood makes you nosy. If you discuss politics, people find you interesting and may even consider you smart if you memorized enough facts and threw in a bit of analysis. Yet, discuss the neighbors, and though people might find you interesting, you will be negatively labeled a gossip (and if you have enough facts and have analyzed them, people will probably avoid you altogether).

It has to do with distance and familiarity. The further away the people being discussed are and the less personal information we have about them, the more we consider it "news" rather than "gossip". The distance has created a feeling of objectivity, which people believe can create accuracy. If you tell me about the dating habits of a culture I'm not familiar with or of a specific person in that culture whom I've never heard of, I would not consider it gossip; it's educational, it's newsworthy. But do the same about celebrity life-style, faces that are familiar and of my cultural world, and I shun it as gossip. This idea of distance and familiarity works in terms of time as well as space as to what we consider appropriate. There is a certain span of time that turns the looked down upon digging up of dead bodies into the respected archeology.

This rather wavy line we have drawn between news and gossip is a bit silly actually. We like to think the source of news is more accurate than the source of gossip, but if you ask the gossipy neighbor what they know about you, you would be quite surprised by the accuracy of the information. And if you knew what really happens in a government as opposed to what information is allowed to become "news", you would be appalled by the discrepancy. An example of questionable accuracy of news/history is when you google "Tiananmen" in China and see tourism pictures while when you do the same in other countries you get information about the 1989 protest and see tanks in the square. This is not to say that China is worse than other countries concerning accurate information to its people. Europeans have heard more about the atrocities of the Iraq war than Americans due to censored news in the USA.

For right or wrong and for whatever reasons we have drawn a line between gossip and news. But we should be careful when we say one is better than the other as both have their place in society if the information is accurate and not ill meant. Gossip can be used as a necessary form of social control. Keep an eye on your neighborhood, that's how you know if a child there is being abused or neglected or a wife being beaten. I hope you're not just reading about poverty, abuse, and the like in the news while your neighborhood has all the same excitement and you're doing nothing about it. Let's make gossip constructive, give it a better image. We might as well try to make it useful because gossip is here to stay.