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### Authors

Harrington, C Lee

Bielby, Denise D

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Author(s): C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby

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# WHERE DID YOU HEAR THAT? Technology and the Social Organization of Gossip

C. Lee Harrington\*  
*Miami University, Oxford*

Denise D. Bielby  
*University of California, Santa Barbara*

What happens when gossip—one of the most traditionally intimate forms of communication—“goes public” on electronic bulletin boards? We explore how impersonal trust, generated by the mode of transmission and the social context in which it occurs, alters gossip in particular and observable ways. Drawing upon exchanges about the entertainment industry that are representative of gossip on electronic bulletin boards, we find that members draw upon a variety of resources that shift gossip’s verifiability from reliance on intimate social bonds and assurances of truthfulness to overt negotiations that emphasize honesty. We also observe how status and power hierarchies surrounding information are influenced by negotiated honesty. We conclude with some observations about the impact of technologies on the nature of social bonds.

Most gossip occurs in a context of privacy and intimacy (Eder and Enke 1991; Fiske 1987; Gluckman 1963; Merry 1984; Spacks 1986).<sup>1</sup> Typically an informal type of personal communication, gossip flourishes in close-knit, highly connected social communities and facilitates social bonds between group members (Merry 1984, p. 277). But as the context changes, how is the gossip community—or the gossip itself—transformed? As theorists point out, rapid changes in the ways we communicate generate new questions about the nature of human interaction (Jones 1995; Poster 1990), alter radically the impact of time and space on talk (Jameson 1991; Meyrowitz 1985; Poster 1990), and blur the distinctions between public and private activities (Denzin 1992). What happens when interpersonal gossip—traditionally one of the most intimate forms of communication—“goes public”? In this article we compare what is known about gossip in traditional close-knit social contexts to gossip as it appears in one nontraditional context: electronic bulletin boards. Conversation on electronic bulletin boards reproduces some of the features of face-to-face interaction, including immediacy, intimacy, and sequentiality. We are interested in how interpersonal communication is affected by nontraditional social contexts and whether the mode of transmission alters gossip in systematic and observable ways.

Human interaction can be radically altered by new technological forms (Jones 1995; Nickerson 1994; Ogan 1993; Rafaeli and LaRose 1993).<sup>2</sup> While innovations as far back as the

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\*Direct all correspondence to: C. Lee Harrington, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 45056

printing press are widely recognized as expanding and altering channels of communication, electronically mediated conversations, such as those on citizens band (CB) radio, the telephone, ham radio, and electronic bulletin boards, restructure the "situational geography" of social life by canceling contexts and creating new interpersonal speech situations (Meyrowitz 1985; Poster 1990). Traditionally, a natural relationship exists between physical space and social interaction such that being "at work," for example, describes not only a place but a mode of interaction. When we communicate through electronic media, "where we are physically no longer determines where and who we are socially" (Meyrowitz 1985, p. 115). Interaction thus takes place in a "noncontext" or "nonspace."

Most electronic bulletin boards (BBSs) share common organizational arrangements that create a unique context and structure social interaction in distinctive ways. By paying a monthly subscription fee or on-line charges, members from anywhere in the United States (or the world, as is the case for most services) may post public messages that are accessible to all other subscribers of the service both day and night, seven days a week.<sup>3</sup> Members have potential access to a virtually unlimited set of others to interact with, but in most cases the individuals are not, at least initially, personal acquaintances. As a result, individuals do not rely upon social similarity or location in common social networks as a basis for deciding with whom to communicate (if at all). Instead, as members of a system, subscribers have access to each other through a variety of file topics under which they may post public messages and reply to one another.<sup>4</sup> The relative openness of BBS interaction alters the rules of access to a conversation: any subscriber may either actively participate or eavesdrop ("lurk").

Most bulletin board systems on large, commercial computer information services, such as CompuServe, Prodigy, GENie, and America Online, sponsor a myriad of topics for discussion—gardening, lifestyle, soap operas, computer software, genealogy, music, health, and so forth—which delimit the subjects discussed. Subscribers participate on the public boards as time permits; many become "regulars" by posting at least once a day and occasionally more often under favorite topics. Depending on the policies of the service and the degree of activity on the boards, "original" notes and their replies are deleted after a period of time, anywhere from a few days or a week to a month or more. While posts are still "alive" members may post messages to continue an old subject or initiate new topics. Thus, conversations "linger" on BBSs longer than they do in face-to-face interaction, but they do not last indefinitely. Like topical development in conversation, messages, replies, and replies to replies are posted chronologically and in sequence, necessitating that members read everything in order to make competent contributions. Bulletin board conversations are rarely dyadic, which significantly complicates interaction, but participants are able to gain perspective in the time it takes them to read a message and its replies, adding their own if they choose. This structure produces a "step-reflexivity" that is characteristic of electronically mediated interaction (Dannefer and Poushinsky 1977).

BBS dialogue is sequential and can be immediate, but it differs from typical conversational interaction in that it is not conducted face-to-face or through voice contact. Upon joining a system, members are assigned an identification code that ties their use of the service to a name and billing address or access node associated with their personal account. Subscribers usually link account identification codes to their legal names, but pseudonyms may be used, depending on the service. Some systems provide the option of a nickname or alias associated with use of an account. BBS members can participate anonymously, not unlike the widely adopted practice on citizens band radio of employing a "handle" instead of one's FCC-issued license

number (Dannefer and Poushinsky 1977). But unlike CB radio, interaction on a BBS is not limited to those who happen to be monitoring an exchange within the limited range of a local radio signal.

Participation on bulletin boards does not typically reveal characteristics such as age, occupation, social class, or ethnicity, factors that are known to impact conversational dynamics (Boden and Bielby 1983; Stone 1990; Zimmerman and West 1975), although the user's gender might be disclosed (or disguised) through the use of a first name or nickname. Moreover, autobiographical information that is often mutually disclosed as face-to-face relationships unfold is not routinely shared on the boards. This raises interesting possibilities in terms of identity. As Steven Jones (1995, p. 15) asks, "Who are we when we are on-line?"

Identity becomes "invented" or "imaginary" in that one's presentation of self is completely open to manipulation (Goffman 1959; Hiltz and Turoff 1978, p. 87). BBS users are aware of this possibility and know that the "alter egos" with whom they correspond might be fictionalized (Hiltz and Turoff 1978, p. 88). This potential distortion of personal identity should impact gossip tremendously. What does it mean to strip the intimacy from intimate communication? Rather than gossiping with lovers, friends, or acquaintances, BBS members gossip not just among strangers but strangers whose self-presentations might be either completely fictionalized or only partially representative of the "whole" person (Westen 1991). Gossip occurs, then, not only in a nonspace but also potentially among "nonpeople" or "partial" people.<sup>5</sup>

Two concepts are relevant to a discussion of the contextual transformation of gossip: *status* and *trust*. The producer of gossip gains power and status from being able to "manage the news," while the consumer of gossip receives personal pleasure in being a "privileged insider" (Rosnow and Fine 1976, p. 88). "Power dynamics are tilted in favor of the producer and not the consumer" (Rosnow and Fine 1976, p. 89) in a culture where "knowledge is always power" (Barber 1983, p. 138).

Some analysts claim that new technological media dismantle the power and status relations that govern traditional forms of communication by allowing for more democratic information sharing: "Factors such as institutional status, personal charisma, rhetorical skills, gender, and race—all of which may deeply influence the way an utterance is received—have little effect. . . . Equality of participation is thereby encouraged. New, serendipitous considerations. . . determine who 'speaks' most often" (Poster 1990, pp. 122-123). While in intimate conversations there usually emerges a single leader who directs the dialogue, there are likely to be multiple leaders on electronic media, allowing for less hierarchical conversations (Poster 1990, p. 107). One analyst goes so far as to suggest that "something close to a Jeffersonian democracy reigns in a world where users *are* what they write" (Grimes 1992, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, status hierarchies do emerge. Some participants elicit considerable response, while others are engaged far less frequently if at all. There are many reasons why a regular poster may be ignored: lack of insight about a particular topic or straying "off topic," offensive self-expression, or a general inability to move the conversation forward (McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith 1995, p. 102). In contrast are those whose posts are routinely engaged. These members may offer insights or expand the focus of discussion by initiating new subjects, interjecting humor, exhibiting encyclopedic knowledge about a particular topic, or demonstrating tact when conflict erupts. In the relative absence of cues regarding conventional social and personal characteristics, other traits determine status and influence on BBSs.

Trust is important to all social bonds, in part because it creates moral “maps” for people to follow (Barber 1983, p. 19). Trust is assumed implicitly in ordinary conversation (Wardhaugh 1985): we trust others’ self-presentations unless there is some reason to suspect otherwise. In traditional contexts, gossip has the potential to both create and destroy social bonds because it “indicates who is trustworthy and who is not” (Merry 1984, p. 291). Traditional interpersonal gossip thus requires members to be oriented to issues of confidentiality, group affiliation, reciprocity, and secrecy.

In the context of electronically mediated gossip, trust is impersonal at best. Most traditional social control measures are unavailable to participants, embeddedness in social relations is virtually impossible, and participants are often unable to evaluate or influence courses of action (Shapiro 1987, p. 634). While most of the literature on impersonal trust focuses on fiduciary relationships such as those between stockbrokers and clients, its tenets are applicable to other relational forms as well. In BBS gossip, information is shared and disseminated by group members but often cannot be verified due to recipients’ lack of expertise or lack of access to data sources (Arrow 1985). Below, we examine not only how impersonal trust relationships are established and negotiated, but also how they create opportunities for the abuse of trust. We explore secondarily the relationship between trust and status in the context of electronic gossip.

We focus our analysis on BBS gossip about the entertainment industry, in particular, celebrities and television series. While some scholars dismiss celebrity gossip as irrelevant to the creation and maintenance of social bonds (Spacks 1986), it is important to examine because celebrities are a frequently utilized conversational resource and an “element in the community’s social world” (Fine 1977, p. 460). Similarly, while it might be argued that celebrity gossip is not characteristic of gossip among intimates (and hence not appropriate for the purposes of this article), the nature of contemporary celebrity—particularly the perceived intimacy fans feel for celebrities—allows gossipers to focus on people that they “know” (Gamson 1994).<sup>6</sup> Finally, it might seem that celebrity gossip precludes, almost by definition, fruitful investigation into questions of truth and trust. Truth seems inaccessible, both because of the technological constraints mentioned above and because of the focus on celebrities, who are removed from the gossipers’ localized circle of friends and acquaintances. Indeed, the “truth” of celebrity gossip is probably less relevant to the personal lives of the gossipers than who was awarded the big corner office or the contents of Uncle Bob’s will or the neighbors’ marital squabbles.<sup>7</sup> As such, celebrity gossip might seem more oriented toward the pleasure of the *process* than the satisfaction of a final *outcome* (Gamson 1994).

As we shall see, celebrity gossip *is* oriented toward the truth, however elusive that truth might be. When people gossip about Michael Jackson’s wedding to Lisa-Marie, or about O. J. Simpson, they are, in part, simply enjoying the pleasure of speculation. But they also genuinely want to know why the marriage occurred or whether O. J. “did it”—they might never know the truth and might be suspicious of any publication or person claiming to know the truth, but they still want to know. They seek out information that might lead them to the truth: from each other, entertainment magazines, talk shows, and so on. The search itself is pleasurable, but it *does* presume the possibility of an outcome.

Does the general inaccessibility of truth in celebrity gossip render questions of trust moot? To the contrary, the lack of access to the truth makes celebrity gossip one of the best vehicles for a discussion of trust. It is *because* the truth is inaccessible that gossipers must trust one another. If someone tells me that my Aunt Sally got married I do not necessarily have to trust

her; presumably, I could call Aunt Sally for verification. But if someone tells me Michael Jackson got married, I cannot call him to find out for myself. I have to decide whether to trust the gossip and the “proof” he provides. Issues of trust are thus highlighted rather than absent in celebrity gossip.

Our analysis explores the social transformation of gossip. First, we examine how the mode of information transmission alters traditional gossip. While scholars have explored the impact of new technologies on discourse processes in general (Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Jones 1995; Poster 1990), the transformation of particular forms of interaction, such as gossip, has not been fully examined. Hence, we aim to uncover similarities and differences between traditional and nontraditional gossip, focusing particularly on the issue of trust. We show how trust among BBS participants is created and sustained through overt negotiations of honesty rather than through members’ reliance on intimate social bonds. In addition, we consider the observable ways that status and power hierarchies emerge over time in concert with negotiated honesty. We argue that the process is not “serendipitous,” as suggested by Mark Poster (1990), nor is it necessarily predetermined by individuals’ social status.

## DATA

Our data consist of printed copies of messages posted on electronic bulletin boards by subscribers to two computer information services.<sup>8</sup> We collected messages on a daily basis over a three year period from March 1991 to March 1994. During this period these two services were promoted heavily as user-friendly and grew rapidly in membership. Total membership numbered in the millions, and although subscriber demographics are not available, those who engage in gossip on these BBSs necessarily have access to a personal computer and are sufficiently computer literate to post messages and to engage other subscribers in dialogue. Thus, they are likely to be more affluent and better educated than the general population. To the extent we were able to discern demographic features of the participants, men, women, adolescents, and adults participated fully in exchanges. The individuals examined in this study can be described as consumers of television who are interested in celebrity gossip and are oriented to the reception of information about the entertainment industry but are aware of the limits of verifiability.

We focused on messages in which members commented on or queried the veracity of information or honesty of the information-provider or engaged each other in ways that revealed the interactional construction of trust around celebrity gossip. However, downloading all such messages was neither feasible nor necessary. In terms of feasibility, most BBS exchanges are not dyadic but rather multipartied. Original posters drop out, new ones join in, and the gossipers at the “end” of the conversation might be completely different from, and unknowledgeable about, those who initiated it. Moreover, since conversations unfold gradually, the repercussions of a particular posting might take days, even weeks, to develop and subsequently die out.

Moreover, just as gossipers drop in and out of the conversation, so does the conversation itself shift location on the boards. For example, a dialogue that began under the general heading “Daytime Soap Operas” and the subheading “AMC” (*All My Children*) might spawn multiple sub-subheadings—“Tad on AMC” or “Tad/Dixie”—in which the “same” conversation with overlapping participants ensues. Or the actor playing “Tad” might appear on *Oprah*, which could inspire the conversation to jump to a completely different location on the boards. As such, locating and downloading all messages pertaining to a particular subject matter was

impossible. It was also unnecessary for the purposes of this research. Many postings provide support but do not move conversation forward (e.g., “‘Tad’ looked great on the show Friday,” followed by “I agree” and “Me too”). We examined hundreds of different message threads and downloaded postings from thirty of them for analysis. While these thirty are not a probability sample from a well-defined population, they were selected as representative of the phenomenon of interest, and the sampled exchanges are representative of the type of dialogue that regularly occurs on large commercial BBSs. In general, we reproduced entire posts, but some were edited for grammatical errors and/or for information irrelevant to our analysis.

Ideally, the best way to examine issues of honesty and trust would be to study them directly, rather than through instances where trustworthiness or honesty are in question. But the issues emerge in BBS dialogue *only* when transgressions have occurred or are suspected to have occurred. BBS members do not post messages about their trust in one other, but they do post messages about their suspicions and distrust. Bulletin boards are a written medium and we can thus analyze only what is being posted. An absence of discussions about distrust might imply the presence of trust, but this seems a bit of a leap of faith.<sup>9</sup>

In monitoring the bulletin boards we were attentive to the “culture” and “life cycle” dynamics of BBSs in general—who tended to initiate discussions and who replied, the incorporation of new members and disappearance of old ones, the emergence of particular interests and the decline of others, and the imposition of norms (McLaughlin et al. 1995). We were also attentive to dynamics around gender because some scholars argue that gossip provides a viable alternative mode of communication for women and other marginalized groups (Jones 1980; Merry 1984; Spacks 1986). We expected to find female subscribers dominating bulletin board gossip but did not. However, women’s participation in BBS celebrity gossip exceeds their participation in many other features of these computer services, such as news or hobby bulletin boards. Nevertheless, celebrity gossip was engaged in by substantial numbers of men as well as women. As best we could discern, adolescents, young adults, and older individuals all participated.<sup>10</sup>

## FINDINGS

### From Truth to Honesty

The rearrangement of space, time, and interaction that occurs on electronic media leads to a shift in orientation among BBS users. As suggested, gossip is information that may or may not have a known basis in fact (Rosnow and Fine 1976, p. 11). In traditional gossip among intimates, one presumably believes (or does not believe) the information because one trusts (or does not trust) the source(s) of the information. Users of BBSs, however, are engaged in impersonal trust relationships and cannot evaluate the information they receive on the basis of personal intimacy or traditional identity markers of the information provider. Rather, BBS gossip can be evaluated only on the basis of perceptions of the informant’s honesty.

Our analysis shows that, like ordinary gossipers, BBS members attempt to establish the veracity of the information they are sharing through references to outside sources. Users rely on secondary sources, refer to personal knowledge or relationships, or, as is the case with entertainment gossip, claim to have direct connections to it which account for their access to inside information. In referencing an information source, a speaker implies three things: first, that she is not solely responsible for the piece of information; second, that at least one other person supports or accepts the information; and third, that she cannot be accused of telling untruths, because the information did not originate with her (Goodwin 1980, p. 682). Our



findings suggest that an important difference between traditional and nontraditional gossip is the greater demand in the latter for explicit referencing of source; since speakers cannot implicitly trust one another on the basis of an intimate relationship, there is an increased need for (re)assurances of honesty.

Despite speakers' uses of referencing devices, challenges to knowledge claims sometimes occur on BBSs, just as they do in ordinary gossip. These are face-threatening to participants as they "directly [question] an underlying assumption of conversation—that everybody is telling the truth or at least presenting his or her best version of it" (Wardhaugh 1985, p. 152). Below we discuss each form of attempted referencing, and show how the BBS context transforms the claims-to-knowledge process.

*Secondary Sources* One way BBS members attempt to legitimate their messages about the entertainment industry is through reference to secondary sources such as fan magazines, fan club newsletters, and celebrity-oriented television programs. This is not surprising, since research indicates that most people continue to hold confidence in the media and view it as a reliable source of information (Koenig 1985, p. 122), and consumers are becoming more savvy at reading cultural sources intertextually (Fiske 1987; Gamson 1994). Note the following examples of intertextual referencing among BBS users:

Larry [a character on *Days of Our Lives*] will not go unpunished for his crimes, that from an interview in the new *Soap Opera Now!* with Michael Sabatino.

*Northwest Afternoon* just announced that Jack Wagner is leaving *General Hospital* to star in *Santa Barbara*. He apparently got sick of the long hours he was forced to put in.

In each example, the gossiper explicitly points to an outside source of information to establish the veracity of the message for others. By relying on an "official" secondary source, the participant implicitly requests that the content of the message be accepted as official as well (Goodwin 1980).

Not all secondary sources are considered credible sources of information. Several message threads reveal members' perceptions of unreliable sources:

*Initial query:*

I noticed Frisco and Felicia [characters on *General Hospital*] were on the cover of the *National Enquirer*. It said that [they] were having problems in real life. Does anyone know more about this?

*Replies:*

That article has no truth in it. I found out from [the actor's] fan club.

The President of the fan club . . . said not to believe the article at all.

I think we all should know by now not to believe anything we read in those "trash" magazines.

I saw [the article] but it was in the *National Enquirer* which is a tabloid and you can't really believe all they say.

If you are talking about the article from the *National Enquirer* then don't believe that trash, it is untrue.

In this message thread, the original piece of gossip was discredited because the information source was judged to be unreliable. The honesty of the *gossiper* was not disputed; rather, the gossip was rejected because of the perceived unreliability of the original source—the *National Enquirer*. This contradicts Ronald Wardhaugh's (1985) suggestion that in questioning the credibility of gossip one implicitly questions the credibility and honesty of the gossiper as well. Here, while the speaker references an outside source as a way of displaying support for the information (Goodwin 1980), that support is rejected by group members who make a distinction between unreliable "trashy tabloids" and credible fan magazines:

The *National Enquirer* is a trash magazine, but *Soap Opera Digest* is not a scandal sheet. *SOD* is very careful about what they print. If readers felt *SOD* couldn't be trusted (or supplied mostly bogus info), they'd stop buying the magazine and it would fold very quickly. Likewise, if soap stars, producers, and other behind-the-scenes people thought *SOD* was printing lies, they'd stop giving them interviews, cover pictures, and other exclusives. In other words, if *SOD* says [the relationship between the two actors] is in trouble, it's in trouble . . . given the magazine's reputation.

Through on-line dialogues, members negotiate with one another about the trustworthiness of secondary sources and thus collectively construct and sustain the content of their shared culture. In particular, it is important to members that in the absence of opportunities to establish the truthfulness of information, the reliability and integrity of a secondary source is emphasized and its location within the "reputational web" of media outlets is understood.

*Personal Sources* A second means by which BBS users attempt to legitimate gossip is through references to personal relationships or private sources of knowledge. Because these references are often vague and indirect, they are not always effective in traditional gossip (Koenig 1985). They are perhaps even less effective in BBS gossip, due to the impersonal nature of participants' trust for one another. Consider the following claims:

Frisco [character's name] is leaving *General Hospital* to go to *Santa Barbara*. . . . I was told it was . . . because his character became very boring. . . . Earlier I posted a bulletin . . . stating that I heard Frisco will be killed in an earthquake. A friend of mine called and said oops, rumor was wrong. She heard there definitely will be an earthquake, but Frisco DOES NOT get "killed" off the show.

My feeling is that something big will happen between Abby and CJ [characters on *LA Law*] and then the following week, CJ will go out and find herself a gorgeous date as an act of denial. . . . I know for fact that she will have a date with a gorgeous guy as my cousin Bill is to be the dish.

Both claims point to a central dilemma about BBS gossip: if one cannot adequately evaluate the trustworthiness of the immediate source of information (the BBS member), on what basis can his friends be trusted? Note one woman's reply to a suspicious gossip-recipient:

I said on the bulletin board that [the information I posted was from] a backstage *General Hospital* crew member! And NO I did not make it up. . . . [The] crew member told me Felicia would die. . . . I simply told people about it.

Since BBS participants cannot judge the information in terms of its messenger, gossip is often suspect. In this example, contrary to the *National Enquirer* exchange, the credibility of the gossip is being questioned; this is face threatening and elicits the response: “NO, I did not make it up.”

Some subscribers post only partial information, which infuriates other users. One member posted that she knew about upcoming events on *LA Law*, but since an inside source had given her the news she could not reveal it. Pressured by other subscribers to share the information (“do tell, do tell”), she replies: “If the rumor I heard was true, then I would be divulging confidential information. If it isn’t true, I would be making an incredible ass of myself. Both of those things concern me, I confess. I’m not sure which outweighs the other.” Her quandary sparked a heated dialogue about the issue of confidentiality in gossiping:

As for not revealing your sources, have you ever heard of “deep throat”? Watergate was one of the stories of the century; Woodward and Bernstein STILL haven’t revealed their sources. If sources want their names kept confidential, journalists can’t reveal them. This is standard practice in every part of the industry from the *New York Times* right down to those supermarket tabloids. If the names of sources aren’t revealed that doesn’t mean the story is false. It just means the person giving the info doesn’t want to get in any trouble.

This posting is interesting for several reasons. In one sense, it reveals gossipers’ awareness of the importance of confidentiality (Bok 1982) and their acknowledgment that BBS members—like traditional gossipers—have the prerogative of protecting their sources. It also reveals suspicion of those who refuse to “tell all,” especially in the context of a public forum where people log on explicitly *to* share and discuss information. By holding back news, BBS users are perceived by others as not playing fair. In traditional gossip, information withholding can be a deliberate strategy employed by speakers to enhance audience participation in gossip activity and to manipulate the bond between speakers and hearers (Besnier 1989, p. 318). This strategy might appear particularly appealing in impersonal trust relationships where participants have no way of validating the information they receive and no other means of accessing the truth (Barber 1983; Koenig 1985; Shapiro 1987). But while information withholding does facilitate gossip activity on BBSs (in that the act of withholding itself can become a topic of discussion), it threatens rather than strengthens the tenuous trust between members. As Nancy Baym (1995) points out, the norms that develop in bulletin board groups are directly related to the purposes of the group. Since this community is centered on the transmission of celebrity news, the deliberate withholding of information threatens its stability.

*Professional Sources* A potentially problematic information source utilized by BBS members is the entertainment industry itself. Gossip shared by someone who claims to have a direct link to the industry is usually accepted by group members, but—because they strike to the core of the community—celebrity knowledge claims are also placed under heightened scrutiny by other gossipers. As we shall see, these claims exacerbate questions of both truthfulness and trustworthiness.

Occasionally professional ties to the industry are made explicit in postings: “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news [a television series is being canceled]. I work in the entertainment business and I know several people who work on the show.” More often, however, a subscriber’s credentials are requested by a member who suspects she is dialoguing with an “ex-

pert.” For example, one message contained a long description of the emotional angst of being a celebrity, which elicited the following query and response:

I have the distinct feeling there is an important piece of information that I don't have here. Are you an actor/performer/entertainer? What do you do?

I am a personal manager of recording artists. . . . I have been involved with several top ten recording artists, mostly in the 1960s. I left the business for 20 years and just returned.

A second exchange involves a user who requested plot information on past episodes of *Northern Exposure* and received a very detailed response from John (not his real name) that ended: “I hope this brings you up to date a little bit. Stay tuned. It gets better. I know this because I've seen the next two episodes.” When asked why he was able to preview episodes, John replied that he works at a postproduction company that handles a number of different television series and that he is able to view episodes three to four weeks ahead of the general public. The issue of confidentiality emerged again, as several members asked for specific plot information from upcoming episodes. John refused, explaining that his job would be in jeopardy if he shared that information. In this instance, John's deliberate withholding of information was perceived not as a manipulative interactional device (see Besnier 1989) but as an occupational requirement and was accepted without complaint by BBS subscribers. What remains unspoken, of course, is the implication that sharing the news would be risky because John would be sharing it with untold numbers of relative strangers (an untrustworthy context) rather than in the context of an intimate trusting relationship. If a spouse, good friend, or sibling asked for the same information, can we assume that John would similarly refuse to share?

In addition to members who have professional ties to the entertainment industry, occasionally there are appearances on BBSs by people who are directly involved with the particular topic being discussed. An assistant director of *Northern Exposure* routinely participates in BBS discussions, offering inside information on ratings and production news and hints about upcoming storylines. His participation is a delight to other subscribers, who immediately orient to him as an expert (i.e., trusted) source:

Ah, someone who actually works on the show! Tell me, is there any chance that the final show of the first season will be shown again?

Congratulations on your association with a critical and viewer (thus far) hit! . . . It's nice to see various industry members corresponding on [the bulletin board]—interesting and informative, too. Maybe I'll be able to keep my finger on a little bit of the L.A. pulse through members like you. . . . Hope you'll continue “talking” to us about *Northern Exposure*.

Occasionally, queries about expert status are answered not by the experts themselves, but by other subscribers:

*Example 1:*

Sorry, I just walked in on this bulletin board and was wondering how you are affiliated with [*Northern Exposure*]?

He's the first assistant director of the show—he was in the credits at the end of the second episode, too.

*Example 2:*

Are you an actor/performer/entertainer? What do you do? Where are you?

He manages musicians' careers—concerts and recording contracts.

These examples illustrate the importance participants place on information diffusion in the process of gossiping, particularly on the status attached to the diffuser role (see below), in that the information shared by recognized diffusers is readily accepted by others (Bielby and Harrington 1994).

There is, however, one type of claim to expertise that is scrutinized carefully by members. Specifically, users who claim to actually *be* media celebrities must “prove” their identity to others. This in part contradicts scholars' assumptions that in electronic communication, personal identity becomes so manipulable as to be virtually irrelevant:

Conversationalists are in the position of fiction writers who compose themselves as characters in the process of writing, inventing themselves from their feelings, their needs, their ideas, their desires, their social position, their political views, their economic circumstances, their family situation—their entire humanity. The traces of their embeddedness in culture are restricted to the fact that they are competent to write in a particular language. (Poster 1990, p. 117; see also Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Jones 1995; Manning 1992)

But an interesting thing happens in this celebrity-oriented gossip context: personal identities *are* irrelevant *unless* one's proposed identity is that of a celebrity. Conversational trust is generally conferred *as long as* one's self-proclaimed identity is “uninteresting” to other members. In fact, it is not really the case that members tend to trust one another's self-presentations: they simply don't care who they are gossiping with. Claiming celebrity status upsets the flow of BBS gossip and makes explicit the limitations of impersonal trust relationships because it centrally targets the heart of the community: celebrity.

During our period of data gathering, BBS members hotly debated the identity of a subscriber claiming to be a soap opera actress. She introduced her identity-claim into a discussion about the future of “her” character on the show: “Do you really think that's what the writers are going to do to my storyline? In case you don't know who I am, I play [character] on [name of show].” This message received a torrent of responses, some that were welcoming but many that explicitly mocked or questioned her claim:

Just what the hell are [you] trying to prove? That's like saying I'm Kareem Abdul Jabaar!!

And I'm Princess Di.

Hi, I'm Elvis and this [bulletin board] is so great I came back from the dead just to say [hello].<sup>11</sup>

Are you really [the actress]??? Or are you pulling our chains? I mean, I've heard that some celebrities [participate on BBSs], but I have yet to come across one. . . . If you really are who you claim to be, I hope I haven't gotten you mad. . . . I just didn't want to get my hopes up.

Included in this last message were also specific questions to “test” the veracity of the claim, including spelling of the character’s name, age of the actress, her previous daytime experience, and so on.

Before the claimant could respond, other members initiated a discussion about whether or not it was appropriate for group members to question her claim. Their conversation focused on the possibilities for fictional identities that are allowed technologically:

[To claimant:] Welcome, this is a very friendly group. . . . As far as why someone would question whether you are really on [the soap opera], it’s not personal, from time to time some [BBS] members like to pretend to be someone they aren’t or start discussions for the sake of upsetting others, please accept our apologies for those that have suggested you aren’t who you say you are, and stay and play.

I can understand why you [the claimant] might be offended, but I wish you . . . could understand why we . . . might be so diligent in wanting to make sure you are who you say you are. It is very easy on this service to pretend to be someone else. Wouldn’t it be horrible if someone pretended to be you and made you look stupid and obnoxious? That is not fair to either you or us.

I think we should give everyone who writes on the board the benefit of the doubt that they are who they say they are until they prove otherwise. Who knows, there might be more cast members reading our notes but are afraid to make their presence known because they think we might attack them.

During the midst of the debate, the “actress” defended her right to assert her chosen identity:

I know a few people out there are trying to check me out, but frankly, I don’t care!! You can ask me all the questions you like, but I’ll only answer the ones that I think are realistic, and not the ones that are trying to test me, because I don’t have to prove to ANYONE who I am.

BBS members responded in a variety of ways. They discussed the validity of her claim, debated whether or not it was appropriate or possible to try to verify it, and eventually engaged in outright detective work, including checking her ID to see if a regular user was using a pseudonym, as well as talking to employees at the soap opera’s studio to see if anybody knew if the actress in question used BBSs.

The furor continued for about two weeks, and members’ sleuthing eventually lead to open indictment of the claimant: “You have been caught in your little farce, and one lie only leads to another. We are living in the real world, not the reel world.” Finally, after a long period of silence from the “celebrity,” the following message was posted:

Hi. I am writing to tell you that [the identity claim] wasn’t real. . . . I started this whole big mess. You see, I wanted to see how people would react if [a celebrity was on the BBS]. I realized that this was wrong, because I had gotten people’s hopes up, and now it is just a big letdown. . . . I am very sorry. I know a lot of you won’t be able to forgive me, but I can’t go on lying to everyone, I hope some people will be able to forget this ever happened.

Subscribers responded to her confession ambivalently, with some expressing overt hostility and others saying that they appreciated the honesty of her confession and hoped she had “learned her lesson.”

This example illustrates how BBS members collectively respond to perceptions of misconduct on the boards. The taxonomy of reproachable conduct for computer-mediated communication developed by McLaughlin and her colleagues (1995) includes categories such as “incorrect/novice use of technology,” “bandwidth waste,” “violation of network and newsgroup-specific conventions,” and “ethical violations.” We consider identity deception an ethical violation, even though it is not specifically mentioned in Margaret L. McLaughlin’s study. Perhaps it is omitted because identity manipulation is always possible but not always relevant. In a context where celebrity identity matters, a false claim is considered reproachable.

This example also illustrates the self-conscious orientation of BBS members toward issues of honesty in the absence of interpersonal intimacy or access to truth. Members must not only question whether information claims should be taken at face value but also confront the implications of fictional or fragmented identities. Because celebrities matter to the group, claims to celebrity identity have great impact on members’ relationships with one another and the maintenance of the community. One of the great ironies of trust is that it inevitably creates the conditions under which it can be abused (Granovetter 1985; Shapiro 1987). Whether BBS members attempt to validate claims by reference to secondary sources, personal knowledge, or expert status, debates about honesty are more central to group culture than in more traditional forms of gossip.

### The Transformation of Status

A secondary focus of our analysis is the relationship of trust to status in electronically mediated gossip. As noted earlier, there are at least two reasons electronic technologies allow for a more democratic exchange of information. First, the invisibility of most traditional status markers renders impossible many of the typical means of designating conversational leadership. Nancy Baym, who conducts research on bulletin-board participants, says: “Some of the people who enjoy extremely high status on the boards tend to be secretaries, who are low-status at work. But their exhaustive knowledge of the soaps gives them status on the network” (in Grimes 1992). Second, the allowance for nearly-simultaneous dialogue means that no one is left out of the conversation or silenced by other speakers (Hiltz and Turoff 1978). According to Poster, “new, serendipitous considerations, like typing speed, determine who ‘speaks’ most often” (1990, p. 123), something that BBS participants acknowledge. For example, an enthusiastic subscriber posted several messages in rapid succession to a soap magazine editor. In his final note, he apologized for monopolizing her attention, declaring, “One last question. I promise!”

Most patterns of communication flow are hierarchical with credible informants at the top of the hierarchy and questionable informants at the bottom (Meyrowitz 1985, p. 162), and in some ways BBS interaction is no exception. High status is achieved through management of the possession, flow, and dispersion of knowledge. “Authority rests on information control” (Meyrowitz 1985, p. 160), including access to it. In the following example, a board member who is an editor from a soap opera magazine, clearly perceived as a gatekeeper of valuable inside information, asks other participants not to contact her through private e-mail:

Thanks so much to all of you for making this board work. I have a simple request to keep it so. Please do not e-mail me questions; I will not answer them. As far as I and [the magazine] are concerned, this BB is an extension of the magazine, and one that gives you a better chance of getting your questions answered than writing to the magazine. Since we don't answer letters to the magazine personally, I am extending that policy to the BB and will not answer e-mail personally. It's not fair so here's fair warning: Letters posted by e-mail will neither be acknowledged nor answered. Thanks and keep talking!

By announcing both her unique access to information through her position and her unwillingness to disclose anything that cannot be shared with all users, she claims status by signaling her control over the possession and flow of knowledge.

Moreover, there are clear status differences among BBS users that in some ways correspond to those between intimate gossipers. In both groups an information exchanger gains status from being a reliable news source (Bok 1982; Derlega and Chaikin 1977; Meyrowitz 1985; Rosnow and Fine 1976; Sattel 1989; Spacks 1986). "The person who repeatedly gives good information when other sources are unavailable or unreliable is providing a scarce, highly valuable commodity" (Rosnow and Fine 1976, pp. 77-78). Among soap viewers, for example, where knowledge of a show's history is a valued resource, a veteran member of one bulletin board was anointed "Mother" for her photographic memory of plot scenarios and teased about owning a crystal ball for her ability to anticipate plot developments. Another group conferred the title of "Soap Queen" on the member with the longest history of watching their favorite program.

The difference between BBS and intimate gossip contexts, however, is that while status among traditional gossipers is often granted a priori or after initial or minimal contact (through observable or known status markers that can be readily evaluated), status in the nontraditional context emerges post hoc—gradually and over time through the process of exchanging information and establishing trust. Consider the following example of how status follows from trust. Over the course of several months a subset of members on one bulletin board found themselves enjoying each others' company in cyberspace more than that of the other subscribers (in particular their similar sense of humor, wit, repartee, and cynicism about the celebrity gossip they shared) and began posting under one or two preferred subjects within the topic. What initially appeared to be a coincidental pattern of "clustered" postings among regulars having fun became a status-based clique that was later openly referenced in their public posts:

I knew I'd find you here. What a wasteland those other subjects are.

What a relief the others can't keep up with us here.

Some of "the others" subsequently complained about these members routinely ignoring their posts, and the clique eventually sought refuge under cover of a private e-mail group. As one observer of BBS scenes noted: "The world of the bulletin boards is not quite an electronic Eden. . . . Members may not be judged by appearance or race, but in-groups develop, intellectual snobbery is not unknown and tempers flare" (Grimes 1992). Nevertheless, by closing themselves off from other subscribers, the group managed to avoid the problem of negotiating trust with newcomers.<sup>12</sup> The formation of this clique reveals how status, at least among non-experts, is contingent upon the trust that emerges from members' reciprocal exchanges.<sup>13</sup>



While nonexpert celebrity gossipers on BBSs negotiate trust among themselves before granting status, they more readily confer highest status on those who they believe work in or have clear professional ties to the entertainment industry. As noted above, status can be derived from control over information flow by virtue of formal position. However, positional or expert status cannot simply be asserted; it must be accepted and endorsed by the BBS community. The authenticity of a self-proclaimed expert's authority is revealed in the following exchange.

*Initial poster:*

Hi, my name is [name] and I'm the editor at [name] magazine. I am here to answer your questions to the best of my ability. Of course I won't be able to answer all your questions, I'll have to pick and choose as I'm sure there will be many.

*Respondent A:*

I don't mean to sound skeptical, but does [the magazine] know you are answering our questions? I'm wondering because you only gave us your "personal" view and nothing quoted from the show. But this is a serious question if you are who you say you are.

*Respondent B:*

Glad to hear that [the magazine] is going on-line. I thought I recognized your name when you first posted about a week ago. . . . I would like to know the status of [the executive producer's] contract.

*Reply to Respondent A:*

Yes, [the magazine] knows I'm answering questions but if you read the magazine, then you know that our [column's] answers rarely quote from the show; we use the knowledge we have. And sometimes, I can give a prediction based on things I've heard, etc., but that doesn't always mean I will be right. If you doubt I am who I say I am, please check the [magazine's] masthead. As for quotes from the show, be realistic; there is no way that the show is going to comment on every question I call them with, especially if it's criticism about one of its core families.

*Reply to Respondent B:*

Understand that I really can't discuss what I've heard about [the executive producer], but I haven't heard anything about when her contract is up.

*Respondent A's reply to the reply:*

I did check. Sorry for questioning your credentials but [the bulletin board service] gets a lot of phonies.

This exchange is typical of the extent to which nonintimate contexts alter gossip. Trust must be negotiated *before* insider status can be achieved, and even trust itself must be "accomplished" through overt tests for honesty.

Once expert status is granted, members orient rapidly to the expert and make explicit references to the expert's professional ties: "Ah, someone who actually works on the show!" In another example, a member explains the status of an expert to a newcomer: "Yes, that is [an actor's] brother. He shows up here occasionally and passes along interesting tidbits." Status can also be achieved by nonexperts who successfully adopt the role of information diffuser. A diffuser who, over time, earns a reputation as a reliable source of information is oriented to by other users (Bielby and Harrington 1994). For example, one member achieved recognition by acting as a self-appointed liaison between the assistant director of *Northern Exposure* and

other subscribers. She routinely posted messages containing information about her private electronic dialogues with the director, and subscribers began asking her to send messages to him on their behalf. Other users achieved short-lived notoriety by virtue of the fact that they live in the geographic area where *Northern Exposure* is filmed and have voluntarily adopted an instructor-identity for other members: "For advanced *Northern Exposure* viewers we will continue later with more Indian/City words from the Pacific Northwest—next lesson will be how to say 'Puyallup.'"

As demonstrated in the example regarding the magazine editor, status among BBS gossipers can be achieved by having knowledge but declining to share it (Besnier 1989; Bok 1982; Sattel 1989). Another example is the subscriber who posted a message saying she knew some important news about *LA Law* but could not reveal it, resulting in orientation to her by other members and a discussion of confidentiality. However, this is more interactionally risky for BBS participants because the community itself is constituted through trust built upon sharing of information. Thus, deliberately withholding information can damage the tenuous relationships between members, as can be seen in the following example where a member asks the soap magazine editor for specifics about an upcoming storyline: "So what is his dilemma going to be?!? Do you know something we don't!!!" The editor replies, explaining the constraints her job places on her ability to disclose information:

Of course I do, but I can't tell you! It would violate the agreement we have with [the show] to get advance information and I would get in big trouble.

The member responds, teasing her about the "privacy" of gossip on the BBS:

Who would know? Us on the BB wouldn't tell a soul, would we guys! Just kidding, but could you at least give us a little hint?!

The editor then provides a (hopefully) sufficient reason for why she is unable to disclose information:

We had a problem lately where a network person was reading [the BBS] and got mad because an editor revealed too much. Read our fall preview for more details; those are the show's official teasers.

In sum, status among BBS participants is not measured by personal characteristics that predetermine one's participation in gossip but in most cases is established gradually and interactionally through negotiations about honesty. Our work contrasts with that of Donna Eder and Janet Lynne Enke (1991) who found that challenges to specific pieces of gossip among adolescents in face-to-face interaction are restricted to high-status group members. In BBS gossip, status must be maintained interactionally, and challenges can originate from any participant. Over time, status can be gained (if, for example, someone proves to be a trustworthy information source) or lost (if a gossipier is perceived as immature or boring or has had a fictional self "outed").

## CONCLUSION

Interpersonal gossip is noticeably altered when it “goes public” on electronic bulletin boards. Because participants cannot draw on personal knowledge of one another to assess what they hear, their trust in one another is impersonal. Unlike traditional contexts where participating in gossip depends upon “who one is,” identity and social location are less relevant on the boards as requisites for inclusion, at least initially. Members tend not to care who they are gossiping with; what matters more is how closely bound the person offering gossip is to the source of information and his or her claims to the information.

In the company of relative strangers, BBS interactants accomplish verifiability in two distinct ways that replace traditional interactional requirements that gossipers otherwise rely upon. First, they shift from reliance upon intimate social bonds to increased attention to references to source, personal knowledge or relationships, or claims to direct connections to inside information. Consequently, queries about the legitimacy of sources are frequent, overt, and central to the acceptance of information by BBS gossipers. Second, because BBS speakers cannot implicitly trust one another, they overtly negotiate honesty. Trust only emerges over time through interaction that establishes participants’ reputability. Insider status follows the establishment of trust, not vice versa. In situations where trust is established relatively quickly, as in the case of most “expert” claims, trust is still negotiated sequentially and established post hoc. When gossipers cannot make acceptable claims to expert status, the same process evolves, but more slowly, over days, weeks, or longer, as gossipers build their reputations as reliable contributors.

The post hoc negotiation of reputability transforms the determinants of status among nonintimate gossipers. In nontraditional contexts, position or expert status cannot simply be asserted; it must be accepted and endorsed by members of the group and must be maintained interactionally. Status hierarchies do indeed emerge: while all can contribute, not all are heard. Nevertheless, unlike gossip in contexts in which challenges originate predominantly from high-status members (Eder and Enke 1991), gossip in nontraditional settings can be challenged by any participant.

Groups with specialized interests like the celebrity gossipers on BBSs have always existed; like-minded individuals find one another through advertisements in specialized publications or attendance at conventions and similar kinds of gatherings, and many continue the relationship through extended correspondence. But the relationships formed through such activities are typically dyadic and intermittent. What is distinctive about BBS-based interest groups is that the technology allows for interaction that simulates extended conversation; it allows a group of people who have come together over narrow interests to have repeated and sustained contact. Moreover, an individual can either be a participant or a bystander to the conversation, dropping in when she is “in the mood” or has something to say. As long as posting remains public, she can keep abreast of the conversation.

What emerges is a geographically dispersed idioculture (Fine 1979) based on narrowly defined interests. The group has some of the intimacy of a localized subculture built on face-to-face interaction, but participation can be and often is confined to a selected component of a person’s identity. Members come to trust one another and value one another’s company but only with regard to a narrowly delineated topic. With BBS technology, individuals have opportunities to participate in many such electronic idiocultures, sharing a different part of their identity with the members of each. In short, an individual can simultaneously present different aspects of himself to different worlds, establishing a semblance of or even real intimacy

and trust in each. He cannot enter at will (except to lurk), and he must establish credibility and reputation to continue participating. But apart from that, he can be anybody he wants to be, and as many different people as he wants to be, with the discretion to exit at will.

An individual who engages in fragmented participation in many electronic idiocultures is immersed in multiple and only partially overlapping social bonds. Individually, each bond may be a limited source of intimacy and locus of trust, but what do they provide collectively? Some argue that rather than creating a community forged on secure social bonds, these new technologies create only a facade of strong ties that form a virtual rather than a real community. Addressing the social implications of CB communication, W. Dale Dannefer and Nicholas Poushinsky (1979, p. 617-618) observe: "Unfortunately, the social network thus produced is fragile. This peculiarly constructed order is most vulnerable to erosion, subversion, and manipulation by those with nefarious ends because anonymous others can intrude and escape with a minimum threat of detection." CB interaction is both more transitory and more anonymous than BBS conversation and therefore the bonds established through it are particularly fragile. Nevertheless, Dannefer and Poushinsky's observation is probably relevant to social bonds established through most new forms of electronic interaction.

The technological medium through which interpersonal gossip occurs affects how social bonds are created among participants. We have shown how a technology transforms gossip, an activity that usually takes place in relatively closed, intimate contexts, into an activity engaged in by large numbers of nonintimates. As Joseph Meyrowitz (1985, p. 122) notes, "The evolution of media has begun to cloud the differences between stranger and friend and to weaken the distinction between people who are 'here' and people who are 'somewhere else.'" But how are social relationships transformed by these technologies? Are they more or less enduring? More or less meaningful? Has the basis for the relationship changed? How is communication altered? While researchers have begun to explore these issues (see Jones 1995; McLaughlin et al. 1995), it is still not known what kind of relationships or communities are formed through computer-mediated communication.

Perhaps the most intriguing questions raised by our analysis are about the creation and maintenance of trust and about the relationship of truth to trust. As noted earlier, impersonal trust relationships are characterized by a context in which social control measures are generally unavailable, mutual embeddedness in social relations is not possible, and participants are largely unable to evaluate or influence courses of action (Shapiro 1987, p. 634). But in most impersonal trust relationships, such as those between stockbrokers and clients, there are agencies that govern and regulate relationships. If a stockbroker engages in a major transgression against the client's trust, her license can be revoked (Shapiro 1987, p. 642). There is, then, a loose structure that exists a priori to the establishment of most impersonal trust relationships and that guides their activities. Participants have fairly well-defined roles to play, and there is a formal surveillance mechanism in place although it may not be utilized.

Not so in BBS relationships. Initially, there are no roles to play—or, rather, everyone is playing the same role of participant—and there is no "higher power" to call on should trust between members be violated. On some BBSs there are staff who monitor use to ensure that subscription fees are paid, but no formal structure exists to monitor the relationship between participants. On the boards, it's a free-for-all. Trust is generated completely from within. Members generally trust one another—both the gossip they share and their self-presentations—not because they can't find out who someone "really" is (as the case with the pseudoc celebrity illustrates)—but because there is a communal understanding that it is inap-

propriate to do so. BBS users are well aware of the potential to fragment and fictionalize identities on the boards, but—and maybe this is a holdover from more traditional contexts—they largely refrain from the detective work that would uncover such transgressions. Unless a major violation occurs, BBS gossipers rarely go outside of the context of the boards to check on each other, although they do check on the veracity of the information disseminated. Instead, as a community, they create a rather tenuous “bubble of trust” and collectively maintain it over time.

The transformation of the relationship between identity, trust, and community is not unique to entertainment-oriented BBS gossipers. Some of the early, influential writings on computer-mediated interaction anticipated the dilemmas surrounding the manipulability of identity (Hiltz and Turoff 1978), and recent research has begun to explore new types and formations of community allowed by electronic technologies (Jones 1995). Trust is intricately entwined with issues of identity and community in everyday conversational interaction. That interaction implies a basic sense of trust among participants: “I am who I say I am and you are who you say you are, unless there is reason to suspect otherwise” (Wardhaugh 1985). In traditional interactional forms, we usually have access to multiple markers with which to assess trustworthiness and reputability: age, gender, occupational and educational status, mutual friendship networks, and so on. But in computer-mediated interaction, we have only the written text and the various meanings that can be made from the text. Trust is a blind leap; there is reason to suspect that you are not interacting with whom you think you are interacting.

But if questions of identity and trust are so central to computer-mediated interaction and to the communities formed through that interaction, why do so few discussions of trust seem to occur on electronic bulletin boards? In most cases even though the question is there, it is irrelevant to the interaction taking place. Most computer-mediated communication is less about the *who* of interacting that the *how* and the *what*. Within the context of different groups, the question of *who* becomes relevant at different times and for different reasons. Among users gossiping about entertainment celebrities, only when a user makes a celebrity-identity claim is the heart of the idioculture, and members’ trust for one another, tested. Compare this to other discussion groups, such as the numerous therapeutically oriented BBSs that talk about substance abuse, eating disorders, or sexual dysfunction. We might find trust and confidentiality to be frequent, overt topics of discussion that occur prior to an active participant’s acceptance into the group, rather than issues discussed only when violated. Or consider the more troubling case of lurkers. If you have only tenuous, impersonal trust relationships with those with whom you know you are interacting, how do you establish any basis for trust with those eavesdropping on your conversation? Given that lurking seems to be the main activity on electronic bulletin boards (McLaughlin et al. 1995), questions of trust must be addressed in further research on electronically mediated interaction.

It is difficult to assess the full impact of new technologies on social connections. We have discussed several ways in which electronic bulletin boards might transform the creation and maintenance of social groups, but further examination of these issues is warranted. In addition, future scholarship should explore further how participation on BBSs transforms social boundaries and redefines status relationships. Finally, there is a need for broadening consideration of interactional specifics, such as gossip, that are essential constituents of social organization but are often overlooked.

## NOTES

1. Following others, we define gossip as informal communication about real or fictional people or events that are not currently present or ongoing (Besnier 1989; Bok 1982; Eder and Enke 1991; Spacks 1986). While rumor and gossip are often treated as the same phenomena, they can be distinguished in that the basis of rumor is always unsubstantiated while the basis of gossip may or may not be a known fact (Rosnow and Fine 1976, p. 11). Gossip can function in many different ways. At one extreme it can be judgmental or malicious, while at the other extreme it functions to create intimacy and closeness (Merry 1984; Spacks 1986).

2. Our focus is on technologies that approximate face-to-face encounters, not those that publicly disseminate information, such as newspapers, newsletters, broadcast communications, wire services, reference books, and so forth.

3. We use the term "public messages" to refer to messages that are posted and accessible to all members of the service, as opposed to "private messages" that are addressed and accessible to a specific user. Using the terminology of "public/private" is awkward in the context of a medium that is neither public nor private in the traditional sense; however, these are the terms that users and services utilize, so we follow their conventions.

4. Members may also interact through private e-mail that bypasses public bulletin boards altogether and deposits messages into subscribers' personal mailboxes. We analyze only public postings in this study.

5. This "partial" presentation of self occurs in most other relationships as well—we all bring multiple selves to interactions and selectively display them depending on context, participants, and so on. But the possibility for manipulation and deception is magnified on BBSs, due to the relative absence of traditional identity markers. One can "play" with gender or age or race on BBSs with an ease that would be difficult to approximate in other interactional contexts.

6. Indeed, for people who enjoy gossiping, celebrities are actually a much better subject of gossip than ordinary people because there *is* so much information one can know about them, and there are no repercussions for one's actions (Gamson 1994).

7. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

8. BBS messages are in the public domain. When subscribing to a BBS, members acknowledge that access to posted messages is open and that any right to information contained in the messages is waived. Therefore, transcripts of postings are also public information.

9. A study of those who are silent on the bulletin board might be intriguing, but a study of "lurkers" (as they are called) would have required a very different approach to the topic. Such an approach would require us to initiate our own postings to query members about their silence, but we deliberately adopted a noninterventionist approach, choosing to study BBS dialogue as it occurs naturally.

10. As best we can determine, this is who participated. Of course, some male participants may have identified themselves as females and vice versa. However, we have no reason to believe that this is happening in large numbers. It is known that this kind of deception regarding gender occurs in electronic communication.

11. These three quotes are an amusing illustration of the norm of reciprocity in information sharing. Even when the information is not believed, gossipers respond reciprocally (e.g., "If you are a celebrity, then I am too!").

12. Some members of this private group subsequently joined other BBSs, participating publicly on them and often assuming status among the regulars on those boards by virtue of their status in the private group. At times their presence became disconcerting to the regulars on other BBSs.

13. This example also illustrates how opportunities for participation on BBSs are transformed when members come to know one another better. As members develop interest in one another, friendship networks form, as they do through traditional means of communication. The difference is that on BBSs, status follows from trust and intimacy whereas in traditional contexts, status markers might instigate (or repel) the formation of trust and intimacy.

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