Not So Blind Items: Anonymous Celebrity Gossip Exposed[1]

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[1] The title refers to a recurring segment ("Not So Blind Item") on a popular celebrity gossip website, PerezHilton (URL: *http://perezhilton.com*).

1 INTRODUCTION

> "Celebrities have become focal points for the discussion of a wide range of issues and concerns. In a peculiarly contemporary way, celebrities, via journalistic reportage, have become the effective conduit for discourses about the personal: celebrities have become the discursive talking points for the political dimensions of a host of formerly private and personal concerns." (Marshall 2006, p. 322)

Information and Communication Technologies brought about a change in how we manage our relationships (cf. Ben-Ze'ev 2004) and our reputation (cf. Solove 2007). Being a platform for mass media as well as for individual representation, the World Wide Web allows for new forms of celebrity gossip. One example for this is "blind gossip". Blind items are usually published on websites, blogs or social networking platforms. They are scandalous, outrageous or kinky insider information on famous people without naming the persons in question. Most of the time, these items deal with sexuality, (c)rude behaviour or major character flaws. More or less obvious clues lead to the solution of the riddle, like a puzzle for those readers who are familiar with the celebrity universe. At the end of this section you will find an example, discussing the sexual orientation of two female TV stars (*Fig. 1*). Blind items are a subject of public debate: It is a constitutive part of the phenomenon that the online community speculates about possible candidates for the solution. Good guesses are rewarded with social esteem. These discussions are a specialized form of gossiping.

In this paper, the main traits of blind items and their impact on the notion of privacy and publicity are explored. The observations are gathered from a popular blind item website: *BlindGossip.com*, a website that aggregates texts from different sources, therefore covering a wide range of realizations of blind items. The aim is a depiction of characteristics and implications of an increasingly popular online practice. Chapter 2 provides some theoretical background on gossip in general and celebrity gossip in particular. Chapter 3 sums up the analysis of *BlindGossip.com* that I conducted. In Chapter 4, I dig deeper into the question of privacy and publicity in a celebrity's life with regard to the findings from blind gossip. Chapter 5 gives a short conclusion.

Bergmann (1993, p. 8f.) refers to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, defining a "great-souled man" (let's expand this to women, too) as someone who is not a gossip. A scientist should not blacken, ridicule or bash people's communication practices. I therefore try not to be judgmental of *BlindGossip.com* and its users. This does not mean that I turn a blind eye to the problematic aspects of the phenomenon. Some will be brought up in Chapter 4, but the focus of this paper is to describe and contextualize a communicative practice, not to assess it from an ethical point of view. I leave this task to the readers.

Two Television Stars

[Blind Gossip] These two very attractive actresses were both stars of multiple television series, although they have not starred on the same show. Both are intelligent and well-educated. Both have been nominated for multiple awards, although neither has won any big awards.

What few people know is that the two actresses were in a very happy lesbian relationship with each other for several years. One of them was ready to come out of the closet, but her team talked her out of it at the last minute. They told her that it would hurt the ratings for the very successful show she was on at the time, and that it would also potentially hurt the career of her partner if they were publicly seen together.

The two women have since broken up, but it certainly would have been quite a shock to the fans if they had come out as a couple at the time! BTW, one actress got married and had children. The other has remained single, but has "dated" several famous men, and is now linked to her costar.

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October 2nd, 2012 | Tags: actress, awards, dating, education, gay, kids, marriage, television | Category: Uncategorized

113 comments to Two Television Stars

jackballjonez
October 2, 2012 at 11:31 am Log in to Reply

i dont know cagney and lacey

> **Okayeah**
> October 3, 2012 at 6:53 am Log in to Reply
>
> LOL Other than the "have not starred on the same show" part, why not?

Fig. 1: Example of a typical blind item on *BlindGossip.com* (including a part of the discussion)[2]

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[2] URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=47631* [2013-01-15]. Please note that shortly before finishing this paper there was a site relaunch that truncated part of the archives (maybe not permanently, though). The material used in this paper was stored from January to March 2013, saving the original discussions. The most popular guesses for this blind item were Lauren Graham and Marcia Cross of *Gilmore Girls* and *Desperate Housewives* fame, respectively.

2 Theoretical background on (celebrity) gossip

2.1 Definition and functions of gossip

Gossip is a social practice that probably has its roots in primate grooming. Grooming (i.e. picking out parasites of a partner's fur) was important for the social relationships within a group. Due to the growing size of human groups, mutual grooming between many group members became too time-consuming. So, other forms of social cohesion had to be established. This might have been a major impetus toward language evolution and the development of gossip (cf. Dunbar 1996).

Gossip is universal (cf. Bergman 1993). It is just as essential to human communication as it was in ancient times, regardless of its mostly negative reputation as destructive and unethical behaviour (see Ch. 2.2). In his seminal work "Discreet indiscretions" (first published in German in 1987), Bergmann defines gossip as follows:

> "On one hand, gossip designates the *content* of a communication and is also lexically defined in this sense, that is, as 'news about the personal affairs of another'. […] On the other hand, gossip designates a communicative *process* and is paraphrased in this sense most often as 'babble' or 'talk'. These semantic components are even more dramatically evident in expressions such as 'chatter', 'titter-tattle' or 'prattler.' The designation 'gossip' therefore unifies the fact that news of a special type is communicated with the way in which it is communicated." (Bergmann 1993, p. 45).

To him, the relational structure of gossip – i.e. the social relations between the persons involved in gossip – is at the core of understanding the phenomenon (cf. Bergmann 1993, p. 48). Gossip forms a triadic structure consisting of the following positions:

1. *The subject*: The subject of the gossip is absent and has to be a grown-up, because gossip is all about the "*tense relationship between a revealed 'first' and a concealed 'second' world*" (Bergmann 1993, p. 53), between the public and the private affairs – a child would not have a private persona that is different from the public one.
2. *The gossip producer*: The producer knows and transmits information but is usually not a close family member or friend. He or she is well-informed on the subject (cf. Bergmann 1993, pp. 55ff.). The knowledge is "*socially segregated*", "*morally contaminated*" (Bergmann 1993, p. 58) and must be of value to seeing the subject in a new light. The interpretation and significance of the gossip shared is crucial too, as well as it being believable (cf. Bergmann 1993, pp. 98f.)
3. *The gossip recipient*: He at least indirectly knows the subject and is actively contributing to the process of gossiping (cf. Bergmann 1993, pp. 67ff.).

Most other definitions of gossip use similar terms and descriptions, although to this day there is no consensus on some main questions. The following list contains the most

important features that are in discussion (cf. Fortunati 2009, p. 46ff.; Birchall 2006, p. 95[3]):

- Gossip occurs between two or more people (a small group of participants) who are talking about a third person. This third person is usually not present.
- The subject matter of the gossip is usually very personal, concerning the private sphere as opposed to the professional life. The most common topics are "personal qualities and idiosyncrasies, behavioural surprises and inconsistencies, character flaws, discrepancies between actual behaviour and moral claims, bad manners, socially unaccepted modes of behaviour, shortcomings, improprieties, omissions, presumptions, blamable [sic!] mistakes, misfortunes, and failures" (Bergmann 1993, p. 15f.). To express it less technically: 'love, sex, children, family, birth, death, marriages, housework' (cf. Fortunati 2009, p. 50).
- Gossip can be both trivial and highly significant. It does not have to be true.
- Gossip is informal talk, based on mutual trust between the gossiping parties. Due to the third person not being there, it is possible to express attitudes and evaluations without directly threatening the third person's face. Still, the participants sometimes have the sense of engaging themselves in something indecent.
- It is some sort of ritual exchange with a certain conversational pattern, in its most basic description "discussing who is doing what with whom" (Fortunati 2009, p. 47). It contains the reconstruction of events, the classification of these events and moralizing on the events. Typical conversational patterns involve presequences, invitations to gossip, the proposal of a gossip story, the gossip story itself, and the authentication of sources and credibility despite frequent exaggerations (cf. Bergmann 1993).
- The gossip is often repeated in other contexts, usually leading to its modification or even distortion.

Birchall takes an interesting angle on the subject. Gossip is popular and illegitimate knowledge, as opposed to official and legitimate knowledge. Popular knowledge is uncertain, not verified, discredited by authorities, but still in mass circulation. It is produced in unofficial contexts and can be very stable even despite attempts from official sites to discredit it (for example, hoaxes and conspiracy theories). Gossip very often does not even claim to be veritable. This adds to its persistency (cf. Birchall 2006, p. 96).

So, why do people gossip? What functions does it serve? The main function of gossip is often described as 'elaborating social norms, social control and social typing'. It discusses transgressions of social norms and therefore reinforces them, because people usually try to avoid becoming the target of malicious gossip and sanctioning. It is also said to facilitate social cohesion just like grooming did long ago – be it as a form of socializing or as a benchmark for comparing your own behaviour to those of others. Gossip can induce a wide range of positive and negative emotions, from pride to contempt, from anger to enjoyment, from sympathy to rivalry, from anxiety to self-content. Gos-

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[3] Birchall cites *Ayim, M. (1994): Knowledge through the grapevine: Gossip as enquiry. In: R.F. Goodman/Ben-Ze'ev, A. (eds.): Good gossip. Kansas: University of Kansas Press.*

sip is always connected to social status: Gossipers, i.e. persons who are "a gossip", can have great power over people in their surrounding and influence the opinion and ultimately the reputation of the members of a community. Shaming, i.e. putting others to public humiliation because of their deviant behaviour, is more than ever a common practice. Gossipers serve as something that Solove (2007, p. 85) calls the "norm police". On the other side, gossip can be the first step toward solving a conflict. More than anything else it is a pleasurable pastime. (Cf. Fortunati 2009, p. 47f.; Bergmann 1993, pp. 120ff.; Hermes 2006, p. 292; Jaeger et al. 1998, pp. 105f.).

In the knowledge economy we live in, gossip is an important source of information besides formal knowledge. It helps to evaluate management, corporations, and even markets (cf. Birchall 2006, pp. 94f.). Through gossip, people get relevant news, spill relevant news to others and "pursue the goal of exploiting the values and moral ideas to which they implicitly or explicitly refer in their information in order to promote their own interests and of adapting them to their interests through appropriate interpretations" (Bergmann 1993, p. 147). This can lead to a boost in social status. Bergmann (1993, p. 149) speaks of gossip as "the social form of discreet indiscretion", meaning that gossipers strategically spill confidential information to gain morality, group cohesion and information.

At the same time, gossip is often scorned. According to a study (cf. Jaeger et al. 1998) conducted in a sorority, frequent gossipers are judged to be less likable. They have no lowered self-esteem, less of a need for social approval and are more powerful in a group, but at the same time they are more anxious. Moderate gossipers have the most friends, infrequent gossipers the fewest. Gossipers are more likely to be targets of gossip themselves. Women who are frequent targets tend to be perceived as less likable; on the other hand, frequent targets have more close friends.

Why is the appraisal of gossip so double-faced? The next part is dedicated to this question that is very important to understand the phenomenon of blind items.

2.2 EVALUATIONS OF GOSSIP

Bergmann traces the "condemnation" of gossip and the whole tradition of seeing it in a negative light back to the Bible and ancient thinkers like Aristotle. Not being a gossip was and is considered a virtue; gossiping was said to be a useless amusement of the "lower classes". Still, gossip has never gone out of fashion and is meaningful to the rich, the beautiful and the powerful, too. And still, gossip is mostly associated with negative connotations. (Cf. Bergmann 1993, pp. 21ff., 24ff.). "Gossip is dangerous because it is a bad practice, excessive, unfixed in truth, unsecured by the presence of those discussed, and presents information out of context." (Birchall 2006, p. 97). It is considered to be the wrong kind of communication: immoral, breaching etiquette and revealing a bad character (of the gossiper, that is) (cf. Birchall 2006, pp. 97ff.).

Gossip is often considered as being destructive, in the sense that it is able to destroy reputation and relationships of the three involved parties: the producer, the recipient, and the target (cf. Jaeger et al. 1998, p. 103). From a negative point of view, gossip does less to endorse and more to undermine social norms. One reason for this is that the source of the transported knowledge is as unknown as who is responsible for its accuracy. Another reason is the unacademic nature of this knowledge and its irrefutability (cf. Birchall 2006, pp. 96, 103ff.).

Historically, gossiping has often been associated with women (cf. Bergmann 1993, pp. 59f.), which in part explains the negative evaluation by rationalists (cf. Hermes 2006, p. 292). Gossipers were thought to be women mostly, "blabbers" (the German word for this would be "Klatschweib", transl. "gossip-broad"). This view has been empirically rebutted long ago. However, some feminists do not deny the presumed female supremacy in gossiping but rather try to re-evaluate it as politically subversive and positive (cf. Bergmann 1993, pp. 59ff.; Fortunati 2009, p. 50; Jaeger et al. 1998, pp. 104f.).[4] Birchall (2011, p. 105) explicates:

> "Rather than reading gossip as spiritually corrupting [*e.g. in the Bible; H.O.*], general bad practice, an enemy of love [*e.g. in medieval books on courtly love, H.O.*], unsecured by presence, a deviation from the pursuit of truth [*e.g. by Aristotle, H.O.*], harmfully speculative, excessive interpretation, and as an obstruction to genuine efforts to understand [*e.g. by Heidegger, H.O.*], the appropriative readings want to emphasize the social or psychological uses of gossip. In this alternative view, gossip's prevalence in contemporary culture might not be a signal of 'dumbing down' or immorality but a necessary feature of a functioning society."

The positive side of gossip can be that it helps to change norms that have lost their authority because in secret they are constantly violated. By gossiping, "[s]ociety's hypocrisy will be revealed, and this might spark a change in the norm" (Solove 2007, p. 64). Gossip can produce an alternative culture by constructing an alternative reality. Very often, gossip is said to be a counterpart to official knowledge (cf. Birchall 2006, pp. 106ff.;[5] Hermes 2006, pp. 292f.). Birchall (2006, 108) goes as far as calling gossip a "constitutive necessity" of society, not just an important one. Her argument is that truth and academic knowledge can only exist through insecure, unofficial forms of knowledge and mechanisms like "decontextualization, distortion, misquotation" (Birchall 2006, p. 123). If it is difficult to identify the source of information, it makes us question authority and be critical of our knowledge culture in general.

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[4] In this paper, I do not make any assumptions on gender ratios within the community of *Blind-Gossip.com* due to methodological problems. It is impossible to say with sufficient certainty whether a user is male or female. It is worth only a footnote to report my personal impression that the following of the blog consists of men and women alike.

[5] Birchall cites Ayim (1994, see fn. 2) and *Spacks, P. (1985): Gossip. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press*.

The invasion of privacy and the clash between a private and a public persona are the most important and interesting aspects of gossip. It drags what is performed at the back stage to the front stage (in the sense of Goffman 1959) and unmasks the private self in public. It is also a communicative game (in the sense of Wittgenstein 1953) (cf. also Fortunati 2009, p. 48). However, neither the public nor the private self represent the true self. There is no dichotomy between private and public but rather different degrees of publicity and privacy. The private self is just as constructed, only following other societal norms than the construction of the private self (cf. Solove 2007, p. 69).

There is a gap between the desire of the individual to be as brief and controlling in conveying personal information as acceptable and the desire of the others to know as much as possible. Leaking just as much private, indiscrete information as necessary about oneself is important to keep social relationships afloat (cf. Fortunati 2009, p. 50). Ronald De Sousa[6] has a more extreme stance. To him, there is no right to privacy at all because discretion only hinders societal progress and stimulates hypocrisy and misunderstandings between humans. Without privacy, there would be no need for gossip (cf. Ben-Ze'ev 2004, pp. 111f.).

Leaving such political evaluations aside, let us not forget that gossip can just be just simple, mindless enjoyment, as Ben-Ze'ev (2004, p. 145) stresses. All in all, Gossip has a great variety: There are different forms, for example the intentional spread of false rumours, breaches of confidentiality, but also harmless chats with no malicious intention (cf. Jaeger et al. 1998, pp. 104f.). The moral and ethical judgement of gossip should therefore be adapted to the type of gossip, as Solove (2007, p. 74) points out: "We should ask: Who is making the disclosure? Is the disclosure made to the appropriate audience? Is the purpose behind the disclosure one we should encourage or discourage?" These questions are especially interesting for an assessment of celebrity gossip.

2.3 CELEBRITY GOSSIP

The development of the gossip industry is tightly connected to the history of mass communication itself (cf. Birchall 2006, p. 93). Celebrity gossip has played a larger role in the media only since the end of the 19th century with the advent of the yellow press, but news coverage on scandals of the political or cultural elite is much older. Magazines specializing in celebrity gossip first appeared in the second half of the 20th century and were aimed at women who did not read regular newspapers (cf. Hermes 2006, p. 291). Nowadays, gossip is everywhere. It has become a staple of most print, TV and radio media (gossip news pages, columns etc.), even of quality papers. Other industries like the movie and music industry depend on celebrity gossip and its power to sell products and images (cf. Birchall 2006, p. 92; Fortunati 2009, p. 57).

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[6] *De Sousa, Ronald (1994): In praise of gossip: Indiscretion as a saintly virtue. In: Goodman, R.E.; Ben-Ze'ev, A. (eds.): Good gossip. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas* (cited after Ben-Ze'ev 2004).

At first glance, celebrity gossip is very different from everyday face-to-face gossip. Following Bergmann's definition, gossip can only occur between people who know each other. The only exception he makes is "*gossip about well-known persons*" (Bergmann 1993, p. 51), which in the meantime would be termed "celebrity gossip". Bergmann even defines fame as the fact that people you do not know gossip about you without having a reciprocal relationship with you. Absorbing gossip in the media necessarily means a shift to celebrity gossip – in order to be interesting, gossip has to be about someone you at least 'parasocially' know. This means, you need to have the feeling that you know someone because you see him or her very often in the news, on TV or in other mediated contexts (cf. Schuldt 2009, pp. 100f.). Celebrities serve as "neighbour-substitutes" (Fortunati 2009, p. 52) in a growing, confusing society. Birchall (2006, p. 92) considers this to be a continuum between normal gossip and celebrity gossip, because both deal with the often assumed opposition between private and public. To her and others, this is not a dichotomy but rather a continuum, too.

Still, mediated gossip lacks some main features of the mentioned definitions of gossip and adds some new topics to investigate (cf. Fortunati 2009, pp. 52, 57):

– Celebrity or online gossip is aimed at an indefinite public audience.
– Its sources and transmission channels are open to citizen journalists and other non-established information providers.
– It consists of oral and written texts, pictures and videos.
– The subject of the gossip rather sooner than later learns about his/her exposure to the public. It is also possible to spread gossip about oneself, be it anonymously or openly.
– Through digitalization, celebrity gossip is easily commercialized and can be of use for the media and the celebrity or targeted subject alike (for example, via becoming an "Internet sensation").

Hermes (2006, p. 291) proposes three varieties of celebrity gossip: "malicious gossip and scandal, friendly stories about celebrities (usually with a focus on babies) and stories about royalty". However, I would not count stories about royalty as a special category, all the more because it can be both about scandals and positive things. In the media, bad news is good news insofar as it is much more interesting to the audience. Especially celebrities who put a lot of effort into forging their reputation are welcome victims of ridicule.

This is one of the main purposes of celebrity gossip. Schuldt (2009, pp. 76ff.) points out that the agenda-setting function of the media is vital for our orientation. Gossip, even more celebrity scandals – a form of narrative, storytelling – is what the media thinks their consumers are interested in. Celebrity gossip reduces the complexity of our environment down to archetypes – the hero, the villain, the offender, the victim and so on. It is moralizing, but also offers ways of identification and the opportunity to live out envy, gloating, letting off steam, hatred, comparison, seeing other at the pillory,

but also admiration and enjoyment. All these feelings are even more intense when we watch stumbling celebrities (both metaphorically and literally). Having inside knowledge about people who are richer and more beautiful is one of the benefits of reading gossip and balances out feelings of inferiority.

Proposing a less ill-spirited motive, Hermes (2006, p. 293, 298) emphasizes on the already mentioned 'parasocial' functions of celebrity gossip, the extension of one's family, showing sympathy and deepening your fandom of an artist. The melodrama and the misery of others is only one aspect, just as gratifying are happy endings.

The main criticism of celebrity gossip is that it is mostly untrue, a waste of time, and undermining culture as a whole. By indulging in celebrity gossip and getting the sense that celeb life is not a rose garden, people pay less attention to injustice and social inequality (cf. Hermes 2006, pp. 303f.; see Chapter 5). Agents, publicists, paparazzi and gossip columnists are very important factors in moulding celebrity gossip, and their objective is to distort reality and trade with fantasies. In the age of ICT, this task has become easier and more difficult at the same time – or, to put it neutrally, more versatile.

2.4 GOSSIP AND CELEBRITY GOSSIP IN THE AGE OF ICT

Since the advent of the Internet, people started to gossip online – in chats, discussion forums, blogs etc. Bergmann's definition, the conversational structure of gossip (mainly based on the concept of "coffee-klatsch" as outlined in Bergmann 1993, Ch. 4) as well as some features named by Fortunati and Birchall clearly do not apply to online gossip. In fact, online gossip might be a good example to show that our societal structures have changed through the Internet: We gossip with people we do not know personally, often not even in the most remote way. Through the Internet, the sheer amount of gossiping of any kind (personal, political, cultural) has exploded.

The interactive aspect of the World Wide Web adds to its authentic and casual feel (cf. Birchall 2006, p. 93). Ever since the *Drudge Report* was the first media outlet to report on "Monicagate" (Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky), the power of the new distribution channel for gossip became obvious (cf. Schuldt 2009, p. 182). In the meantime, blogs, wikis and other forms of collaborative, non-professional knowledge-telling emerged. Schuldt (2009, p. 91, translated by H.O.) asserts: "The gossip of the 21st century operates with the weapons of a new journalistic counterculture. It is quick, bold and eccentric, often sloppy too, but always focusing on maximal entertainment effect." He even goes as far as denoting the celebrity culture nowadays a 'quasi-religion' (cf. Schuldt 2009, p. 182).

Fortunati (2009, p. 46) argues that through the spread of gossip to new technologies it "has become a communicative register which presents itself as trans-medial" (see 2.3 for those features). It has also changed its face:

> "Mediated gossip displaces communicative practice from a local dimension to a national and international dimension, from gossip production to gossip consumption, from a more or less direct experience of life to a virtual experience. However, mediated gossip seems to produce a substitute for social cohesion." (Fortunati 2009, p. 45)

She further argues that mobile phones and social networks are the modern-day mediators of gossip, but rules for protecting privacy (of others and of the self) have not yet consolidated, leading to more or less intentional self-exposure.

Ben-Ze'ev focuses on the similarities between face-to-face gossip and online gossip. His assessment of online gossip is very affirmative. Online conversations that resemble gossip can take quite long and are often much more intimate and authentic than offline gossip, not despite, but because the people involved do not know each other. He claims that online gossip is less malicious and more manifold in its topics as well as less dangerous to the persons that are the target of the topic because of the relative anonymity of the Web (cf. Ben-Ze'ev 2004, p. 146).

I do not agree with Ben-Ze'ev in this point. As Solove (2007) argues, the harm of online gossip can be much greater. Everybody at least in theory has a worldwide audience to expose themselves or others to. Facilitated by social networks like Facebook, cyber-bullying ("repeated, aggressive hostile attacks and harassment of another person online" – Cross 2011, p. 110) has become an issue of serious concern. Remember, gossip can be true or false. Knowledge on the Internet is always dubious. Our culture more and more breaks the dichotomy between knowledge and gossip; we deal with "faction", i.e. information that is neither true nor false, neither knowledge nor non-knowledge. Popular knowledge is not subordinated to official knowledge anymore. In this context, gossip can both interrupt and reinforce power (cf. Birchall 2006, p. 128).

Returning to celebrity gossip, the Internet has added a lot to its pervasiveness. Cross (2011) goes at length about aspects like the information overload, mobility, over-sharing and the definition of public versus private all amidst the digital revolution. She assumes that what was traditionally "low culture" now is about to become the "dominant culture".

> "It is America's Got Talent and Jersey Shore, Michael Jackson and MTV, tabloid newspapers and celebrity spottings, shopping malls and consumerism, conflicts about displaying the flag, prayer in schools, and the theory of evolution, issues of gender and gay marriage. It's Google searches and YouTube videos about Charlie Sheen's rants, the dangers of radiation plumes from Japan, the royal wedding, Lindsay Lohan in and out of jail, laughing babies, and sex tapes." (Cross 2011, p. 19)

Leaving cultural pessimism aside, it is still safe to say that blogs like *PerezHilton.com* or *TMZ.com* have somewhat brutalized celebrity gossip, showing less respect for the embarrassing or downright terrible sides of celebrities and gaining a lot of influence on celebrity culture (cf. Schuldt 2009, pp. 92f.).

Bloggers have a very important advantage: They can publish information that mainstream media cannot write about without fear of getting sued. Ethical codes that apply to journalists do not have the same binding character for citizen journalism (cf. Bruns 2008 and Cross 2011 for a discussion on changes in journalism due to blogs and Twitter). However, norms are a-changing and at least should be self-imposed (cf. Solove 2007, pp. 194.). More thoughts on this shall be developed in Chapter 4. Before that, let us finally get to the example I chose to demonstrate these points: *BlindGossip.com*, a blog that developed a lot of conventions and practices in itself. It encapsulates many aspects of modern celebrity gossip that I have mentioned so far.

3 ANALYSIS OF *BLINDGOSSIP.COM*

> "God, Hollywood. If they're not bipolar, then they are bisexual."[7]

3.1 MATERIAL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

All the items that were the foundation for this paper were stored in spring of 2013, saving the original discussions (see fn. 1 for clarification). The number of blind items sums up to 1,189 items, ranging from December 2008 to January 2013. It was collected as arbitrarily as possible by picking out random months from different years. To observe how some stories develop over the course of days and weeks (which is not unusual), full months rather than single days were covered. It was not deemed important that the count for each month should be similar. All in all, the blog did not have a rise in the number of items per month, but a clear rise in popularity over the past two years regarding the number of comments per article.

– January 2013 (66 items)
– February 2009 (129 items)
– March 2012 (109 items)
– April 2011 (92 items)
– May 2009 (153 items)
– June 2012 (68 items)
– July 2009 (126 items)
– August 2011 (103 items)
– September 2010 (98 items)
– October 2011 (117 items)
– November 2010 (86 items)
– December 2008 (42 items)

I excluded a special kind of blind item on the *BlindGossip.com* website called "BG 12345" – they are editorial texts, requesting the users to post a certain word or phrase

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[7] Comment on the blind item titled "*Seventies Superstar Receives a Mansion Visitor*" (May 23rd, 2009). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=8874*.

(for example, "YES!", though sometimes much more sophisticated).[8] Only after a certain number of comments has been reached, the editor continues with publishing items. This is an interesting way to heat up the community and heighten interactivity, but the articles themselves do not contain any gossip and were therefore not analysed.

The research questions concern the basic description of blind gossip and *BlindGossip.com*. Some rather formal features and the writing style typical for the blog are depicted, as well as the sources which feed the blog (Ch. 3.2). Then, the main themes, topics, and subjects are described (Ch. 3.3). Another important aspect are the given clues that lead the guessing community to a certain person (Ch. 3.4). The dynamics and peculiarities of the discussion forums are the last matter addressed (Ch. 3.5).

Before I start, I need to point out that I will not give too many examples, let alone concrete ones. The reason for this is that I do not want to give away any names of certain persons in combination with the more or less unflattering stories that circulate about them. This would thwart the claim not to be a gossip myself and perpetuate the negative impact of blind gossip (see Ch. 4).

3.2 BASIC DESCRIPTION

Everybody can write a blog for any audience about any topic (cf. Solove 2007, Cross 2011). Conflictingly, although *BlindGossip.com* should not be defined as a blog because it is a website in its own right, it still looks a lot like a blog and shares some features with the genre, especially the idea to publish items in reverse chronological order and linking to different sources of information. Further it offers a blogroll, a tag cloud, a RSS-feed, and connections to diverse social media varieties of the platform (e.g., a Twitter account). The website started out in September 2008 and is run by a person who calls himself Ace. He is supposed to be an insider on the celebrity industry. As stated above, not all the entries are written by him, in the last years his own contributions even became the minority of the articles. In the meantime, most of the items stem from different sources, generally celebrity blogs or online editions of established magazines. The texts published in the sources are copied word-by-word. So, it is more accurate to describe *BlindGossip.com* as some sort of non-automatic blind item aggregator.

Yus (2011, pp. 95ff., 104ff.) proposes a framework for analysing blogs that can be adjusted to other forms of communication on the Internet. In order to be as systematic, I would like to apply it to the platform in question. Yus suggests three perspectives: the intention, the formal qualities and the content as well as the reception. In this chapter, the first two perspectives are applied.

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[8] See, for example, *"BG12345: Wednesday"* (January 30th, 2013). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=50107*.

Starting with the textual and multimodal attributes, *BlindGossip.com* is a rather simple platform in the basic form of a blog: a head with the title and a short description ("The #1 Blind Item Site in The World!"), a narrow central column, a blogroll on the right side. Differing from a classic blog are some subordinated pages (for example, "Contact", "FAQ", "Legal") – however, those pages were added not too long ago. The background colour is white, the colour of the text is black – visually, the platform is very simple and not creative, but functional. The content is mainly written text: short items (usually only a few sentences, often even only a single one) with few internal or external links. Every item is accompanied by a picture that provides more or less important hints for the resolution of the item (see 3.4). Obviously, the content of the website is expected to speak for itself. By now, the archive of the website contains over 5,000 items. "Solved" items build an own category (see 3.3).

The intentions of the platform are manifold. First, it strives to entertain an ever-growing following and elicit as many comments as possible. A second intention is to increase the amount of money made via advertising, because it has become a commercial website. Returning to the question whether it should be considered a blog at all, it is probably more appropriate to assume that it started out as a rather typical blog and became much more over the course of years, i.e. after a critical mass of people got fascinated with the nature of blind items (see *Fig. 1* again or visit the website to obtain a better impression). *BlindGossip.com* is not a personal blog but in part a form of citizen journalism working with autonomous research (albeit on a frivolous topic) and in part a recycling of other material.

Significantly, it is neither transparent who "Ace" actually is nor where exactly his own information comes from; it is not even clear if he works alone on the website. He often writes "us" which is not saying much. First, because it seems to be meant as a game or an attempt at including the audience. Second, because even Perez Hilton, who writes a very personalized blog – although not alone, which is not openly admitted –, writes about himself as "we" when he actually means "I". The momentum of *BlindGossip.com* is a matter of trust and believing in the status and competence of "Ace". The comments make clear that the most favourite items are those that he writes himself. His audience appreciates the elegant writing, the exactly right amount of innuendo that makes the guessing possible but not too easy, and the interesting content of most entries without going over the top like some other sources at times (see Ch. 4 for an example of going too far).

Other sources are multiple blogs and media outlets such as *LaineyGossip.com* and *Daily Mirror*. Accordingly, the writing style of the sources is very different. Some are extremely short and lacking in hints (which is often criticized by the community), others are so obvious that, again, the community complains about it. For example, *Hollywood Street King (DiaryofaJollywoodStreetKing.com)* is a rather new blog with an extremely individual style, regularly posting blind items so obvious that they leave hardly any

room for speculation. This is a conscious strategy of the author (Jacky Jasper) in order to stay out of legal trouble. Additionally, there is often a second juicy information hidden in the items that is not obvious at first reading.

Not all the sources enjoy the same trustworthiness, though. For example, *Pop-Bitch.com* is a blog that had serious legal problems in the past, unjustly accusing a TV presenter of illegal sexual preferences (cf. Birchall 2006). Some sources disappear after some time, others suddenly become very frequent references. An extreme example of a discredited source is described in Ch. 4 (*CDAN*). Blind gossip could be considered a publicist's nightmare and often is. However, there are also signs of interventions and attempts at strategically placing rumours by the team of publicity-hungry celebrities. Ace and other blind item bloggers clearly position themselves as being independent and incorruptible, revealing the truth behind the publicists' lies.

All in all, the massive development of the platform and of the blind gossip phenomenon is also visible looking at the sources. When it started out, it only cited few websites, and those were rather established (e.g. *NY Post*). Now, there is not only a great variety of sources but also of phrasing. The overall style of the items regardless of their author is rather colloquial English, often playful and casual or even sloppy. Sarcasm and the expression of a dismissive attitude are common. Roughly, there are three types of items from a formal point of view.

1. Older items by Ace or items from other sources very often consist of only one sentence, either carried out as a question or as a simple statement (e.g., "This Mogul is finding out the hard way his late friend's family can be a handful when you try to help them."[9]).
2. Usually, the longer items are narrated like a story, often (not always) with a general introduction that not immediately reveals the content of the story, then the actual incident or character trait with a step-by-step coding of all the relevant information. These items are often followed by a breakdown of the persons who are involved and their characteristic role in the story as a reminder for the readers how many slots are to fill (e.g. "All-American Actress", "Significant Other").[10]
3. A third, but rather seldom type is characterized by items that are hardly intelligible and intentionally obscure. They read like babble between friends at the coffee-table ("coffee-klatsch", in a way returning to the oral tradition of gossip). They are plastered with clues and rhetorical questions.[11]

Sometimes the items are written from a first-person perspective of the celebrity that they deal with. They very often involve questions directed at the audience (e.g., "Can

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[9] *"Mogul Is Finding Out The Hard Way"* (June 5th, 2012). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=44221*.
[10] *"All-American Girl and Golden Boy"* (January 2nd, 2013). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=49455*.
[11] *"Slurpa And Morgan And Chemicals"* (August 3rd, 2011). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=31542*.

you guess who I am writing about?"). Every linguistic departure from unmarked language can be a hint to the solution of the blind (see Ch. 3.4).

3.3 MAIN THEMES AND TYPES

The overall theme of *BlindGossip.com* can be summarized as "Celebrities' *Real* Life In The 21st Century". Birchall (2006, p. 91) cites the Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, who helped define the genre of celebrity gossip as saying: "Nobody's interested in sweetness and light." This certainly applies to *BlindGossip.com*. Looking at the overall tone of the items, it is difficult to find positive ones, i.e. items proposing that a celebrity did something nice (e.g. for charity) or succeeded in something to the relief of the writers (e.g. getting sober). Most items are about the dark sides of fame, though. Somewhere in the middle and not very frequent are blinds that reveal harmless, but embarrassing or otherwise interesting trivia (such as, for example, that a star is reading everything on the Internet about himself, including blind items).[12]

The topics of the items can be reduced to four categories, each with a few subclasses. The following list gives an overview. However, this categorization is a fuzzy one. Many items have more than one topic, for example unruly behaviour induced by drug abuse.

Sex: By far the largest group, not surprisingly, are blind items that reveal something juicy or shocking about a celebrity's love life. There are many sub-categories.

- *Sexual orientation*: Starting again with the largest group, a myriad of items is about the sexuality of stars, especially male ones, suggesting that many celebrities are, in fact, homosexual. What is interesting is that there is no negative evaluation involved, neither in the blinds nor in the comments. On the contrary, the community of *BlindGossip.com* seems to be very liberal, encouraging the supposed "closeted" celebrities to "come out already". It is hard to find a male celebrity's name that never came up in such discussions. Speculations on might-be lesbian female stars are far less frequent but, as *Fig. 1* shows, not uncommon.
- *Sexual preferences and unconventionalities*: The whole spectrum of sexual practices that are deemed unusual can be found here, ranging from harmless, but interesting ones to downright pathological and illegal preferences.
- *Cheating/Affairs:* This frequent topic could very well be a sub-category of "*Relationships*" or "*Behaviour*" because it usually and obviously is connected to an impending crisis in a marriage or relationship and often a behaviour pattern. However, the sexual aspect of an affair is the most relevant information spilled in these items. The comments here are very negative, which means that cheating is regarded as unacceptable behaviour.

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[12] *"This Musician is Reading This Post Right Now"* (February 8th, 2010). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=15789*.

– *Sex tapes/nude photos*: In this day and age, this topic deserves its own category. These items are about sex tapes or nude photos that will be released shortly, about the circumstances under which they were produced and if their release is really an accident or a strategy to increase publicity. According to blind items, the last assumption is usually the right one.

Drugs: Not only do celebrities have a versatile sex life, according to blind items most of them are also on some kind of drug, be it hard or soft ones. Alcohol, cocaine and cannabis are the most common ones. The struggle with sobriety is the most important theme in these items. Very often, in contrast to all other categories, even if the attitude expressed towards the celebrity is a patronizing one, the authors usually also express their hope for a change in the person's self-destructive behaviour.

Relationships: In this category, all items that primarily deal with a close relationship are summarized, usually a couple.

– *New relationships*: These items foreshadow "hook-ups" that are not public knowledge yet.
– *Engagements and marriage*: Who is marrying whom soon is of major concern for the community.
– *Pregnancy*: Pregnancy rumours are a frequent topic, too. The interesting part is that some are revealed because it is obviously hard to hide a pregnancy for a long time – while on the other side most of these rumours are never solved. It is not plausible that all these pregnancies resulted in abortion or miscarriage but rather never really existed. The evaluation of the pregnancy is an important side topic.
– *Children and other family*: The parental talents of celebrities are under scrutiny by the public – being a bad parent results in considerable loss of likability. Therefore, the speculation on failures in upbringing a child can become very heated (often these items deal with neglect and disinterest, leaving the education to nannies).
– *Failing relationships*: Another main theme of *BlindGossip.com* are couples on the verge of splitting up or divorcing. Most of the time, these items tell an alternative story to the image couples create via publicists and staged "photo-ops" (i.e. inviting paparazzi to shoot some photos in situations that send a positive message about the relationship). There is a lot of melodrama involved, e.g. love triangles, unwanted pregnancies, mental disorders, "hard-partying", spending the significant other's money (especially when one part of the couple is more famous than the other), a lot of shouting and even physical altercations.
– *Failed relationships*: After a break-up, publicists come up with explanations and declarations that are not accepted as truth by gossipers. In these cases, they set the story of an unfriendly separation straight with a blind item. Usually these items cite cheating as the most common reason, followed by drug addiction and all the vices involved in "Failing relationships".
– *Fake relationships*: An increasingly popular type of blind item is about celebrity pairings that allegedly are not real couples but a "publicity stunt" from start to

finish, made up by the publicity team of both parties. These relationships are hedged by legal contracts ensuring not only confidentiality but even how often the couple needs to be seen together in public. Usually, this type is connected to the sexuality-category because these fake couples are constructed to hide the fact that at least one party of the arrangement is homosexual. This phenomenon is called "bearding", and some of the most prolific couplings in recent years have been suspected to be fake. The community drags numerous names into these speculations and is adamant that most relationships between celebrities only serve the purpose to increase publicity and popularity for both persons. Bearding is said to be a common practice for some of the most famous actors in Hollywood. In this case, the community is especially certain of bearding being a fact. For some names there is no doubt at all left and their homosexuality is treated as fact.

Behaviour and character: This is a vast category including all items that are related to a behaviour pattern, a single action or a trait of certain celebrities.

– *Acting in an inappropriate way*: This can be any behaviour by a star that the community would find offensive, for example being unfriendly to staff or fans, lying (about charity, for example) or even criminal behaviour (ranging from harmless wrong-doing like constant parking violations to capital offences). Especially, celebrities are bashed for big-headed and obnoxious behaviour that stems from a feeling of superiority and being above others.

– *Plastic surgery*: Of course, speculation on plastic surgery or non-invasive treatments (with Botox, for example) is a popular topic but not as popular as the others mentioned so far. This is because again the community not simply assumes that most celebrities indulge in enhancements of any kind but simply *knows* that famous people do so. If it is common practice among all, it is not that interesting anymore. Many items deal with plastic surgery gone wrong.

– *Having issues with weight*: Both being too big and too skinny are popular topics as well and most of the time are about women struggling with their weight. Obviously, the variety of underweight actresses is more common. The items usually are about the extreme measures women apply to stay thin or become thin. Anorexia and bulimia or both illnesses are wide-spread, again according to the celebrity world constructed on *BlindGossip.com*.

– *Celebrity feuds*: Some celebrities do not get along which can lead to full-blown hatred and nasty quarrels. Those are entertaining for the readers of blind items.

– *Being an attention-seeker*: Narcissism is the top character trait (or disorder) of celebrities, if you believe blind gossip. The already mentioned staged "photo-ops" and other ways of being a "famewhore" are everyday celebrity business to "stay relevant".

– *Dark secrets*: Some celebrities seem to hide a very dark past, being familiar for example with abortion, giving up a child for adoption, having been molested or abused in other ways and so on. Here, the community normally shows a lot of sympathy for the celebrities. Still, they speculate very freely. It is extremely rare that someone posts a comment suggesting to leave a famous person alone amidst the disclosed tragedies.

- *Oddities*: This is a very popular category about every strange, embarrassing or shocking peculiarities of celebrities, such as compulsive disorders, nasty habits and quirky likings.

Behind the scenes: These items try to spill information about developments on TV shows (e.g. a central character dying), new casting decisions or what is happening on set that should not be known by the public (e.g. who does not get along, who will be fired).

Some items are repetitive but obviously refer to different persons. For example, there is more than one item claiming that a star tries to make up a new religion or that a female star is losing her hair because of bad extensions and/or because of an eating disorder, published some time apart. Maybe these are cases of modern urban legends that can be accommodated to different celebrities in different times.

What types of celebrities are the targets of the gossip? Most items deal with actors/actresses, followed by musicians. A major category still on the rise are "celebrities" without any observable talent, i.e. persons who are famous for being famous. They are offspring of famous parents, stars of reality and casting shows, party-goers and other pseudo-celebs who are usually and disrespectfully categorized as being "D-list" or even "Z-list". To Schuldt (2009, pp. 104ff.), these celebrities are a new kind of gentry because their fame has nothing to do with any achievement.

On *BlindGossip.com*, not always a moral judgement or evaluation is expressed directly in the items themselves, but of course it is implied and mostly negative. The final evaluation is up to the community.

3.4 TYPES OF CLUES

How does the community guess who the target of an item could be? Most items contain clues that help to solve the puzzle. There are several types of hints.

Profession: Not always, but very often it is revealed what the persons in question are famous for, whether they are actors (e.g. "mostly TV"), musicians (e.g. "R'n'B artist"), reality stars or others. If no profession is mentioned, this is also an indirect clue that otherwise the solution would be too easy or that the target is a case of being talentless ("famous for being famous", see above).

Source: Occasionally, the source of a blind item is in itself a strong clue to solve it. For example, if the source is a British one (e.g. *Daily Mirror*), this implies that the celebrity is from Great Britain as well. *Hollywood Street King* only writes about celebrities of Afro-American origin. Other blogs have "favourites", i.e. targets that they frequently aim at, usually out of animosity or because they have an informant who knows more about the celebrity. Items genuinely by *BlindGossip.com* are often about high-profile VIPs, but also reality stars.

Categorization: In Ch. 3.3, it was already established that very often the celebrity is classified according to his or her status. All varieties of their current value on the market are a giveaway (e.g., "A-list", "B+-list"). On the other hand, this grading is frequently a topic of the discussion in the forum, because the criteria what makes someone A-list or when someone drops to a lower class are unclear (for example, someone who has won an Academy Award is probably permanently A-list, although there is no explicit rule stating this).

Nicknames/Codenames: One of the strongest clues, though not necessarily easy to decipher are nicknames or codenames that the author of an item assigns to certain stars. The alternative names hint at a character trait, something associated with his or her work or a physical feature. One example that has been revealed and shows very well how this works is the former couple "Chip" and "Grin", also known as Katie Holmes and Tom Cruise who are now divorced. "Chip" was chosen to point towards the supposed brainwashing of Katie Holmes in the context of Tom Cruise's devotion to Scientology (chip as in computer chip that has been implanted in her brain, figuratively speaking). "Grin" refers to Tom Cruise's habit of smiling most of the time very brightly.[13]

References to past work: These clues are the most frequent ones. Words or phrases that appeared in a movie, a song or other products by the celebrities in question are taken up and more or less obviously placed in the item. For example, a solved item about an allegedly fake relationship between the singer Taylor Swift and the boyband member Harry Styles contained the phrase "this couple is never getting back together". This is an obvious reference to a song by Taylor Swift titled "We are never ever getting back together".[14] However, the clues are not always that obvious and sometimes even intentionally misleading, pointing towards persons who may be in some way connected to the right guesses, but who are not directly involved. This is an additional precaution to make the riddles harder to solve.

Pictures: All blind items are accompanied by pictures that can be photos or drawings depicting anything, frequently celebrities that are not the right guesses (see below), symbolic pictures (e.g. a baby when the item is about pregnancy) or very loosely connected images (e.g. showing the situation that is described in the item). These pictures can be a very good hint but also of little to no help. One reason is that Ace, the operator of the website, does not always know the solution to the items, so he has to choose pictures according to his own guesses or very general ones that offer no clue. If the pictures are hints, they usually show persons that resemble the celebrities, objects that are

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[13] For example: "*She is Limiting Her Time With This Fool*" (June 6th, 2010). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=18935*.

[14] "*Relationship Runway Rant*" (January 15th, 2013). URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=49788*.

associated with the searched person or pop culture references that are somehow connected to the celebrity.

"And it ain't …": This last type of clue is rather tricky but effective. At the end of an item, celebrities who are not the right guess are excluded with the phrase "And it ain't (e.g. George Clooney)", sometimes even more names. Then, a picture of the excluded person is attached. On the one hand, this seems to make the solution easier because the number of possible answers is reduced. On the other hand, the excluded persons are usually the obvious guess, so their elimination rather raises additional questions. Furthermore, the excluded persons are usually connected to the right solution, for example because of a prior collaboration.

The discussions are mostly about what to consider as clues and how to interpret them. There are also some other aspects of the community I would like to point out.

3.5 THE DISCUSSION FORUM: CONVENTIONS, POPULAR GUESSES, AND ATTITUDES

Discussion forums of websites usually have their own jargons, in-jokes, norms and conventions (cf. Yus 2011). One rule on *BlindGossip.com* is, for example, that links to other sources "must be fully explained". Another one is that the first responder to come up with the right answer is rewarded with a special mention when an item is solved, but only if the proposed response is complete (full name of the persons involved). Good ideas are supported by others (e.g. "+1" as a response) and raise the prestige of a guesser.

The fun in speculating and maybe ultimately even solving the puzzle is the gratification people get from reading blind items and responding to them. In general, the discussions are friendly and supportive; harsh criticism of totally wrong guesses (because someone read a blind item not attentively enough) is rare, but corrections and clarifications are common. The community does not seem to feel guilty in any way to discuss the most private aspects of a stranger's life. Wrongly suspecting uninvolved persons is not something to feel sorry for after a blind item is dissolved.

As stated above, I do not want to throw around names of celebrities that the community targets very frequently ("popular guesses", so to say). However, there are some clear tendencies: Whenever drugs are involved, the same four to five names pop up, usually young, troubled starlets. Whenever a closeted celebrity (i.e. a secret homosexual person) is mentioned, the usual suspects can be narrowed down to three depending on the implied age. Many celebrities have been given an image that very strongly departs from their official one. These new alternative realities are regarded as fact by the community (see Ch. 4).

The expressed attitudes differ but show very clearly how much frequent visitors of *BlindGossip.com* are emotionally involved in blind gossiping, although to most of them

it is just fun. Besides irony and sarcasm, there are three attitudes that are evaluations of the proposed solutions. Many posters enjoy slamming celebrities they do not like ("This has to be her, I always hated her"). Another frequent attitude is denying ("I am afraid it is XY, but I don't want him to be it, I always liked him"). But there are also defences of celebrities who might be wrongly accused of something ("I heard she is the kindest person ever", "Can't be, the clues don't fit"). The general attitude is a very cynical one, as the opening statement of this chapter shows. The celebrity world is condemned as fake, immoral, corrupted and heartless. Not the most sophisticated comment, but a very frequent one is that many blind items (for example every single one about cheating) can be solved right away with the answer "All of them".

Bergmann (1993) described gossip as "discreet indiscretions" (see Ch. 2), the strategic distribution of confidential information to gain morality, group cohesion and information. *BlindGossip.com* is also trying to function as some sort of "norm police", bringing illegitimate knowledge to those who are interested in truth, a counterculture opposed to a celebrity machine that tries to squeeze money out of fans by selling lies. In the last chapter, some implications of this self-imposed function are explored.

4 FAME AND PRIVACY: A JANIFORM PROBLEM

In this section, I would like to discuss two aspects of celebrity gossip associated with *BlindGossip.com*: the invasion of privacy and the notion of truth in celebrity gossip.

Starting with the second topic, I would like to make clear that, in my view, it is not important if blind items report fact or fiction. The point of the matter is that *BlindGossip.com* suggests very strongly that the stories are not only true but more accurate than the information provided by the mainstream media system. Viewing it in a positive light, blind gossip does a job that the mainstream media cannot and will not do: exposing the lies and fakeness of celebrity culture. This seems to be the agenda of most published items. Some even give explicit advice on how to act in future (see 3.3). One effect of gossip is that individuals fear to become the target of gossip and therefore try to either conceal the deviant behaviour or act accordingly to social norms, when society condones it (cf. Bergmann 1993,. pp. 143f.).

BlindGossip.com is a good example of the fact that the Internet not only provides more information but also more useless and wrong information, i.e. misinformation. Rumours and defamation can flourish in this environment, while being trustworthy becomes a more and more important resource for individuals as well as for brands (cf. Solove 2007, pp. 35ff.). It was stated above that gossip has some vital social functions but it is also prone to be a weapon (cf. Solove 2007, p. 65).

In its worst form, blind gossip can result in cyber-bullying. One can assume that celebrities are above this, but unstable characters – and some of the favourite targets can

be described as such – may crumble. Not to speak of the anger about being a suspect for evil deeds or even crimes you did not commit. On *BlindGossip.com* and similar blogs you could just make any statement, give very obvious clues that point to a certain person – but still be off safe. From a legal point of view, there is no basis to sue either the providers or the users of blind items. Neither defamation nor invasion of privacy laws apply. In the material that I observed there was only one instance of the retraction of a solved blind item and an apology to the affected person: The actor Peter Facinelli, now ex-husband of TV-actress Jennie Garth, had been accused of being an adulterer. The apology reads like this:

> We published some blind items about an actor in 2009, and one of the subjects of those items was recently revealed as Peter Facinelli. Peter and his representative contacted us, and we discussed both the veracity and impact of these items with them. Peter asserts that these items are not true, that there were no third parties involved in his marriage, and that these items have been very hurtful to him and his family.
> Out of respect for Peter, Jennie and their children, we have agreed to remove these items from the site, and we sincerely apologize to them for any hurt that they may have caused. Divorce is challenging for any family, and we wish them well during this difficult time.
> Love, BG[15]

This shows very clearly that solved items are not verified items. It is not known if there are more frequent interventions from publicists and lawyers of celebrities who get targeted by blind gossip (except for the occasional hint that a publicist tried to launch a story, as mentioned in Ch. 3.2). What is especially interesting about this incident is that it demonstrates why blind gossip is not harmless fun independent of any journalistic rules of conduct. Rather, an important feature of blind gossip is that it at least should be true, no matter who the name behind it is. The community expects this and demands the solution of an item if it is very harrowing (especially when it is about crimes or habits like exploiting people or treating them badly). The users regard this as a form of social control and imposing social norms on celebrities who became detached from the reality that they are neither above the law nor immune to any criticism of their behaviour. So, it is by no means unimportant whether the gossip is substantiated or not. Its accurateness is what makes it interesting.

Another episode strengthens this assumption. In the year 2012, a case of a very special understanding of "truth in celebrity gossip" was revealed: *BlindGossip.com* excluded the blog *Crazy Days and Nights*[16] (CDAN) from its sources. Previously the blog became suspicious because the author posted a string of extraordinarily outrageous items, suggesting for example with obvious clues that a very famous actor beats his wife and sexually assaulted another well-known actress while drunk. Ultimately it was disclosed that the blog did not only use insider information of unknown origin but also ran fictional stories in the style of fan-fiction. This reveal sparked outrage from the

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[15] *Sorry, Peter!* (March 16th, 2012) URL: *http://blindgossip.com/?p=40888*.
[16] URL: *http://www.crazydaysandnights.net/*.

community, although the blog author had a disclaimer on his website all the time, making absolutely clear that not every story on the blog is based on fact. Obviously, nobody read that – but in the end, everyone cared. The damage had been done before: The discussions on the CDAN items were extensive and emotional. Even though the outrageous claims were discredited, they had an impact on the image of the celebrities that were attached to them. Some words by Ong (1991, p. 78) may help to deepen this thought: "There is no way directly to refute a text. After absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before." I may add, its propositions stick with us, even after refuting them.

This leads us to the second aspect of this section, privacy and what blind gossip means for it. Gossip is not always about the invasion of privacy and the spilling of secrets, it often deals with well-known facts (cf. Jaeger et al. 1998, pp. 104f.). What is privacy, anyway? Privacy is a context where transgressions regarding some social norms are possible without fear of being judged by the public (this does not apply to crimes and treating others badly). It is a space where social stigmata like addiction, suicide attempts, mental disorders, illness, unemployment, and illiteracy (Solove 2007, p. 70) are not used against you.

Do politicians and celebrities have a right to privacy or are they common property? Is everything that is true newsworthy? Is it right to report anything because it is true? What is of public concern and what should even a celebrity be able to keep private? These are some of the questions that arise and that are heavily discussed at the moment. The legislation on this topic differs a lot between the USA and Europe. While in Europe the privacy of any person is treasured, in the USA it is more usual to see famous persons as common property, especially when writing and talking about politicians (cf. Schuldt 2009, pp. 93ff.). This does not mean that the media in Europe are less invasive than those in the USA. Quite the opposite seems true, looking at tabloids in Great Britain, for example.

Solove (2007, p. 132) argues that curiosity and the wish to be entertained do not constitute the right to know something. Even considering that the mainstream media have developed some ethical norms and guidelines of celebrity gossiping (though not always adhering to them, see the recent scandal surrounding *News of the World*), those guidelines by now have not reached all bloggers. The stance that celebrities are common property is sometimes expressed in online commentary. Some users think that stars owe their career to their fans and should not be whiny about an intrusion of privacy.

Some researchers, journalists and bloggers alike claim that there is no privacy for anyone anymore at all, except for what you do inside your own flat without using modern communication devices, perhaps. Whatever you do in a public or mediated space is public and can therefore be filmed, photographed and published on the Inter-

net. To Solove (2007, pp. 7ff.) the true danger of this lies in the good memory of the Internet. Additionally, the "cyberspace norm police" (Solove 2007, p. 9) can be mistaken. Online shaming can be a way to better people who misbehaved but there is no way to stop the online community if an incident is blown out of proportion (cf. Solove 2007, Ch. 4). The Internet is kind of a fulfilment of the global village proclaimed by Marshall McLuhan (cf. McLuhan/Powers 1989; Solove 2007, p. 33; Birchall 2006, p. 93). Gossip and rumour dwell under these circumstances, for example by going "viral".

Even if you believe only a small fraction of the information conveyed by blind gossip, you get the impression that being a celebrity is a dirty business nowadays. Celebrities may not qualify as innocent victims. "Photo ops" (short for "operations") and fake relationships are only two varieties of phoniness. Celebrities intentionally, strategically and programmed use Twitter, Facebook and so on to share aspects of their private lives and to establish the impression of being down-to-earth and accessible. Smart celebs may even know how to use the blind item machine to gain more fame and likability. It is when their guard collapses or something goes wrong that we get the most honest insights that are the least flattering. The loss of control over a situation is the greatest threat to publicists, even though the public seems to love celebrities that rose above the ashes of a publicity scandal.

Blind gossip has also much to do with the advent of increasing surveillance and social media. Celebrities can be tracked down more than ever, revealing themselves via Twitter and other tools much more. There is always a snitch around to report embarrassing or face-threatening actions online, spreading rumours much quicker than in earlier times. Celebrities get hacked too, and very intrusively so (cf. Cross 2011). One example is the stealing of nude photos that the actress Scarlett Johansson took of herself with her cell phone. They were published online and prompted an Internet trend to publish pictures of oneself in similar poses. The unusual fact about this incident is that the culprit was caught and sent to jail.

So, is it the celebrities' own fault that they are the subject of gossip? After all, they need the publicity. What if a celebrity exposes him- or herself to the level of self-harm, being a "train-wreck you cannot look away from" (a meme often used to describe the fascination with celebrity meltdowns)? I would like to close this argument with a quote by Richard Epstein: "the plea for privacy is often a plea for the right to misrepresent one's self to the rest of the world"[17].

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[17] *Richard A. Epstein, The Legal Regulation of Genetic Discrimination: Old Responses to New Technology, 74 B.U.Ö. Rev. 1, 12 (1994),* cited after Solove (2007, p. 35).

5 Conclusion

> "But it seems that gossip continues to be beneficial in terms of rule-learning and social bonding, although a new ethics is needed both in cyberspace and in the old media to balance free speech and privacy and to protect e-actors' reputations." (Fortunati 2009, p. 57)

The clash between the private and the public persona of celebrities is even more obvious in blind items than in traditional forms of celebrity gossip. The invasion of privacy constituted by blind gossip goes very deep: Even if the reported rumours are true, the anonymity of the blog entries threatens the integrity of uninvolved parties via arbitrary speculation. The community often treats pure assumptions like facts. The outcome is a strikingly alternative view on celebrity culture. The fact that people love gossip and at the same time are ashamed of enjoying it, applies very well to *BlindGossip.com*. Some of the posters refer to their activity and the whole website as a "guilty pleasure", as being addicted to the saucy disclosures and the entertaining online discussions.

Gossip and celebrity gossip is more than a pastime of questionable intellectual value (although, granted, connecting the more opaque clues and recalling encyclopaedic knowledge of stars is quite challenging). The opening statement by Marshall (Ch. 1), suggests that there is more to this phenomenon: It can help understand changing notions of privacy. There is even some kind of conspiracy theory concerning celebrity gossip: The increasing impetus of its popularity and the exhaustive, over-whelming (over-bearing) coverage in the media is designed to dumb-down society, to keep the lower classes stupid and quiet. I do not wish to speculate on the substance of this theory and rather go on by specifying what I mean by "changing notions of privacy".

In the age of ICT, privacy is what you manage to keep to yourself. This includes both self-exposure and indecencies by others. So, keeping something private is not necessarily a struggle to protect your personal sphere. Concerning celebrities, private to them are only those actions, relationships and character flaws

- that by chance nobody records (on camera, cell phone etc.),
- that nobody leaks to the media,
- that are either too boring or too dangerous to be published
- and that nobody accidentally or viciously attaches to you because it is fun to speculate like that and because all the clues in a blind item fit.

In the light of this rather blunt conclusion, warnings and pleas like that of Fortunati mentioned above seem to be more important than ever but might already be outpaced by reality. However, from the history of digital media and the Internet, we can learn at least one thing: Platforms and communication practices change at "ludicrous speed".[18]

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[18] Got the clue? If not, google!

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