

**Original Article**

**TABLOIDS AS WINDOWS INTO OUR INTERPERSONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF MASS  
MEDIA GOSSIP FROM AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE**

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**Abstract**

Mass media gossip is interesting to many people, as evidenced by the proliferation of gossip magazines and gossip television shows. Despite its popularity, there has been little research into the evolutionary underpinnings of why gossip contains particular topics. Furthermore, no one has provided input to those working in gossip-based media. Therefore, we begin by defining and explaining mass media gossip using an evolutionary, biosocial perspective. To demonstrate that the media workers may benefit from relying on knowledge of evolved human nature in their work, we conducted a study. We examined the content of three successful tabloids, using a list of evolutionary-based topics created *a priori*. The results indicate that tabloids reflect fitness-relevant topics that were important throughout our evolutionary past. The tabloids equally represent both sexes, and while they mostly concentrate on entertainers and royalty, they do pay some attention to unknown individuals. By correlating who and what is gossiped about, we found celebrities are more often the subjects of stories involving wealth, while unknown individuals are almost always gossiped about within the context of life-threatening events. We use our study to provide guidelines for those working in media, which will hopefully enable their work to obtain maximum audience interest.

**Keywords:** Celebrities, rumors, entertainment, gossip magazines, parasocial relationships

**Introduction**

Mass media gossip is a widely spread phenomenon that elicits incredible interest. For example, *People* magazine reported approximately 1.29 million weekly readership

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sales for the first half of 2010 (Adams, 2010). Despite this popularity, content analyses on media gossip are scarce, despite the urging of Schely-Newman (2004). Here we follow her advice and report on a content analysis of three Flemish (northern Belgian) gossip magazines, or tabloids. We use these results to show that media that relies upon topics that reflect our evolved human nature is successful. Most importantly, however, we use the results to provide guidelines for those working in gossip-based media, with the hopes that knowing about evolutionary psychology will lead to more interesting, and thus more successful, reporting.

We first present a theoretical background of mass media gossip from an evolutionary, biosocial perspective. This rather new approach to the study of mass media gossip enables one to better comprehend its popularity, and more importantly, leads to a specific prediction that can be tested through content analysis. Before presenting the results of a content analysis of Flemish tabloids that we use to show the benefits to media workers, we define mass media gossip. It is highly necessary to clarify our terms, given the considerable controversy about how mass media gossip should be conceptualized (see for example Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004a). Note that we use the word “tabloid” to represent print media (newspapers and magazines) that focus on sensational stories, but acknowledge that it has also been used in the context of television shows (e.g., Langer, 1998).

#### *Defining Gossip, Mass Media Gossip, and Mass Media Rumors*

“Definitions of gossip will always be complex and controversial” (Taylor, 1994, p. 34). Language is used to communicate on an enormous variety of topics, so it is not surprising that there will probably never be a single definition or theory of gossip (see Foster, 2004 for a review). What is surprising, though, is the degree to which different definitions and theories of gossip, even those developed by studying a range of diverse cultures (e.g., Abrahams, 1970; Besnier, 1989; Brenneis, 1984, 1987; Colson, 1953; Cox, 1970; Gilmore, 1978; Goodwin, 1990; Haviland, 1977), overlap with one another.

One may ask whether tabloid headlines such as, “Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie adopt a child,” “Young boy drowns in amusement park,” and “Hollywood stays in shape with new diet plan” are gossip. We contend that they are gossip, but note that there is some resistance to considering mass media messages about others as such. To solidify our view, we follow Brenneis’s (1989) and Post’s (1994) distinction between gossip as an *act* and gossip as a *noun*. When we consider interpersonal gossip as an act, we are referring to a behavior that occurs among individuals who know and trust each other well enough for gossip to be regarded as reliable information (Andersen, 1995; Bergmann, 1993; Gelles, 1989; Smith, Lucas, & Latkin, 1999). For mass media stories, this trust-based relationship between the sender and the receiver is not guaranteed. A receiver might trust certain sources of mass media, but since the sender and the receiver do not engage in real-life interactions, the degree of reliability that is present among exchangers of interpersonal gossip is not as easily reached. Thus, when considering mass media story exchange as an act, we prefer to not label it as mass media *gossip*, but instead as mass media *rumors*. The latter are distinguished as stories with lower degrees of reliability (Bergmann, 1993), which mass media gossip faces more frequently, as compared to interpersonal gossip. We will focus on mass media gossip as a noun in what follows, but wish to highlight here that producers of mass media gossip must be aware of this issue of trust assessment and the associated reliability. In practical terms, we advise these

producers to not only hunt for the latest scoop, but to keep in mind that in interpersonal gossip, multiple sources are used by both the senders and receivers to verify the accuracy of information (Hess & Hagen, 2006). A similar process likely occurs for mass media gossip. Thus, when news is shocking or comprised of “breaking” stories, consumers will presumably seek confirmation from numerous sources. Producers should aim to have not only the latest news, but also ensure it is confirmable, or seek to reconfirm news from other sources.

### *Who is the Subject of Gossip*

When talking about media gossip as a noun, focusing on *who* and *what* is talked about, most researchers agree that gossip is talk about the novel or unexpected traits and the actions of others (e.g., Bromley, 1993; Hannerz, 1967). The people gossiped about in mass media stories are not our friends and neighbors. Mass media gossip deals with stories about the traits and actions of showbiz people, politicians, and people who are completely unknown to us (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994; Bird, 1992; Davis & McLeod, 2003; Levin & Kimmel, 1977; Schely-Newman, 2004; Sloan, 2001). Encounters with these individuals are extremely unlikely, and for this reason some (e.g., Morreall, 1994) have argued that mass media gossip is misnamed, because “gossip” is talk about others who are known to the gossipers to some degree. Others (e.g., Ben-Ze’ev, 1994), however, see no reason to exclude celebrities and other media characters from the definition of gossip. We agree with Ben-Ze’ev’s stance because interpersonal gossip also can include talk concerning individuals one might not know personally (e.g., a friend’s neighbor, a boss’s wife), especially when the focus lies on *what* is being communicated (see below). Thus, in our opinion, mass media stories about the traits and actions of third parties are gossip.

Then, some researchers limit the definition of gossip to talk about absent others (e.g., Bergmann, 1993; Eder & Enke, 1991; Foster, 2004; Gelles, 1989; Hannerz, 1967; Morreall, 1994; Nevo & Nevo, 1993; Wert & Salovey, 2004b), while others like Rosnow and Fine (1974), believe gossip occurs regardless of the presence or absence of its subjects. For example, gossip in the presence of the subject is very common among children (Fine, 1977). Other researchers go one step further, suggesting that individuals can even gossip about themselves (Dunbar, 1998a,b; Hess & Hagen, 2002). We take a moderate position and propose that gossip is the informal discussion of the traits and behaviors of other individuals (third parties). We exclude self-disclosure from the discourse of gossip, but include talk about present third parties who are not the targeted audience.

### *What is the Subject of Gossip*

Gossip is information that is novel or unexpected, and is about people who either act differently from group norms, or from how they usually behave. By saying that gossip is novel or unexpected, we highlight the importance of the context wherein gossip is transmitted (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Hannerz 1967). The context defines the group norms, but also encompasses information about the relationship between the ones gossiping and who are the topics of gossip. For instance, as we begin to know someone better, our expectations for how he or she will act increases, based on our building knowledge, which in turn makes it easier for us to be surprised if he or she does something unexpected. Consequently, information may be seen as interesting gossip to some people

(i.e., it is novel, unexpected), and not to others (i.e., it does not contradict any expectations of them).

The range of topics that can be gossiped about is very broad; in the most general sense, gossip is social information about who is doing what to whom (Dunbar, 1998a; Rosnow & Fine, 1976). Divale and Seda's (1999) cross-cultural analysis of gossip topics among 136 societies resulted in a list of 24 topics. These topics range from romantic behaviors, such as "talk about romantic affairs," to acts of conflict, like "wife beating," and "scandalous events." These same topics are also reflected in mass media gossip (Bird, 1992; Davis & McLeod, 2003; Levin & Kimmel, 1977; Schely-Newman, 2004; Sloan, 2001). Davis and McLeod (2003) compared these topics to the major themes in evolutionary psychology and concluded that "sensational" stories that appear in mass media actually reflect categories of information that increased the reproductive fitness of our ancestors.

An evolutionary, biosocial perspective supports the claim that gossip has an important function, as it assists with survival and reproduction. Problems of survival and reproduction (here on referred to as adaptive problems) are those that have existed over thousands of generations in our evolutionary past. Generally, when looking at the content of introductory works on evolutionary approaches to human behavior (e.g., Cosmides, Tooby & Barkow, 1992; Gaulin & McBurney, 2004; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990), adaptive problems are classified into four types. First, problems of survival directly affect the fitness of an individual, such as finding a place to live, finding food, avoiding predators and so on. Second, problems of mating pertain to issues like finding a good mate, dealing with rivals, and knowing how to keep a mate. Third, problems of parenting pertain to parent-offspring conflicts. Fourth, problems of group living refer to problems of co-operation and conflict, with both kin related and non-kin related others.

These four types of problems are immediately identifiable in the content of gossip, which indicates gossip contains information that is highly relevant to biological fitness. Gossip deals with topics such as "conflicts," "scandals," and "romantic behavior," with sexual relationships outscoring all other topics (Levin & Kimmel, 1977). Indeed, the most popular topics reflect adaptive problems that were crucial to the survival and reproduction of individuals living in the small, hunter-gatherer groups of our human ancestors (see Tooby & Devore, 1987). Said another way, gossip is fun and interesting because it was vital to the survival and reproduction of our ancestors (Barkow, 1989, 1992; Davis & McLeod, 2003; Dunbar, 1998a,b; Hess & Hagen, 2002, 2006; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Acquiring information on who was having sex with whom, who was fighting with whom, and who had access to valuable resources would have increased individuals' ability to navigate their social environment, and consequently their ability to obtain access to mates and resources. Thus, according to an evolutionary, biosocial perspective, we gossip to transfer and acquire fitness-relevant information (see also De Backer & Gurven, 2006).

### *The Function of Gossip: Lessons from Our Evolutionary Past*

One mechanism driving gossip is the vicarious learning that receivers perform, thereby gaining indirect experience and insights into how to behave to avoid shame or to seek out success (see also Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). In this context, the identity of the person who is the subject of gossip is less important, and instead, "what" happened to this person is the key. Gossipers therefore do not need to know the person who is the

subject of the gossip, which in the remainder of this article will be referred to as *Strategy Learning Gossip* (see also De Backer et al., 2007). This kind of gossip is remarkably different from *Reputation Gossip*, which include messages about the traits or actions of third parties who are known to the gossipers. Gossip thus alters the opinion about the person who is the subject of the gossip (i.e., his or her reputation).

It is important to address the multiple functions of gossip, in order to clarify the distinction between Strategy Learning Gossip and Reputation Gossip. As stated, gossip has been proposed that people engage in gossip to manipulate their own and others' reputations (Paine, 1967). Individuals tend to spread both negative and positive gossip about the reputations of others, which effectively increases one's own relative status (e.g., Abrahams, 1970; Cox, 1970; Gelles, 1989; Paine, 1967; Smith, Lucas & Latkin, 1999). Second, gossip allows individuals to compare their own traits and behaviors to those of others (Morreall, 1994; Nevo & Nevo, 1993; Nevo, Nevo & Derech-Zahavi, 1994), and it sets gauges for individual behavior (Fine & Rosnow, 1978; see also Wert & Salovey, 2004a,b). Third, gossip may promote within-group solidarity and between-group separation (Colson, 1953; Dunbar, 1998a,b; Wilson et al., 2000). People are morally evaluated through gossip, and gossip is a way to spread information about those who violate group norms (e.g., Cox, 1970; Dunbar, 1998a,b; Eder & Enke, 1991; Gelles, 1989; Levin & Kimmel, 1977; Morreall, 1994; Nevo & Nevo, 1993; Post, 1994; Smith, Lucas & Latkin, 1999; Wilson et al., 2000). By spreading news about the violation of social norms, people punish rule-breakers and maintain order in their group, thereby ensuring the group's existence and integrity. Kniffin and Wilson (2005) argue this social control function has two end points; not just to reform an individual's behavior, but also to reject the person's behavior. This leads us to the final function of gossip we wish to discuss: gossip can also be seen as a device to learn group norms, values, and one's place within a group (e.g., Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Fine, 1977; Fine & Rosnow, 1978).

In light of these functions, the main difference between Reputation Gossip and Strategy Learning Gossip is that only the former can be used to manipulate reputations. All other functions can be performed by both; either can be used to learn how to behave, which behaviors are accepted or rejected, and how we perform in comparison to others, even if the people who are the subjects of the gossip are unknown to us.

Therefore, a first practical guideline to producers of mass media gossip would be to reflect upon the reason why they wish to share information with their audience. If their motive is solely to attack the reputation, or to reform the behavior, of a celebrity, we would advise them not to publish the story. The reason is twofold. First, in Reputation Gossip, the information is primarily relevant to consumers who know the person who is the subject of the gossip. If it concerns a widely known celebrity, the producers will trigger the interest of a wide audience. However, if it involves less well-known celebrities, some of the audience will be disinterested. In cases of less known celebrities, they risk to lose the interest of part of their audiences. Second, even in cases of well known-celebrities it is a risky business to attack reputations. From studies about interpersonal gossip, we know that people are happy to hear positive news about their family and friends and negative news about their rivals and foes, and do not like to hear negative news about their loved ones or positive news about rivals (see McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). Our minds process information about celebrities in similar ways to how we process information about our real life friends and foes (Barkow, 1992), and some people react very emotionally upon hearing positive or negative news about their

favorite celebrities (see e.g., Brown, Basil & Bocarnea, 2003). Producers of mass media gossip therefore also risk losing audience members who feel upset about Reputation Gossip, which is not congruent with their personal feelings towards the celebrities.

By ensuring that all their messages do not exclusively focus on Reputation Gossip, but also contain (or are completely comprised of) Strategy Learning Gossip, producers of mass media gossip are ensured to trigger the interest of a wide audience, as everyone can benefit from the associated vicarious learning. We predict, as argued above, that these stories will be most relevant when they refer to adaptive problems. We note that Strategy Learning Gossip about non-adaptive problems may still be relevant for transferring information about how to behave successfully in today's world (e.g., learning the social etiquette of using a Smartphone in particular situations).

This said, we predict stories that are not directly related to adaptive problems will be less likely to trigger a strong emotional response. Imagine a choice has to be made between publishing the following stories: "A young woman accidentally slipped and fell from the fifteenth floor window of a building, and died instantly" versus, "A young woman was attacked by a shark when out swimming, and died instantly." Both are cases that contain information about how to avoid danger that can result in a sudden death. Both are situations that relatively rarely occur. Thus, from an evolutionary point of view, we predict the second statement will evoke more interest than the first because it will trigger an emotional reaction to an adaptive problem. Our ancestors were at risk because of animal attacks, but skyscrapers are too modern to trigger evolved emotional responses.

A second aspect of Strategy Learning Gossip is that negative news will trigger stronger responses than positive news. It has been shown that negative information has greater influence than positive or neutral information, is retained better (e.g., Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Taylor, 1991), is more likely to be considered as "newsworthy," and is more readily believed as compared to positive information about others (Lupfer, Weeks, & Dupuis, 2000). Using an evolutionary point of view, Rozin and Royzman (2001) have theorized this negativity bias promotes fitness in that learning how to avoid danger is greater than the fitness benefits that can be gained from learning how to improve well-being. It may be extremely costly to miss an opportunity to learn how to avoid a highly dangerous situation, but missing an opportunity to learn how to become even more successful has few costs involved. Therefore, an additional guideline to producers of mass media gossip would be to focus on Strategy Learning Gossip that teaches how to avoid danger rather than on stories that promote success. As a final point, we want to highlight that this negativity bias will be most relevant for Strategy Learning Gossip about people who are unknown, as compared to celebrities. It can be argued that consumers will pay attention to gossip about celebrities' success as well, since some, especially younger people, regard celebrities as teachers of how to achieve success (see De Backer et al., 2007). Even neutral information about celebrities might for these reasons be of interest to audience members; a general copying bias seems to apply in our quest to copy the successful behavior of those with prestige (see Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

In sum, taking an evolutionary approach, we advise producers of mass media gossip to mainly focus on emotionally appealing stories about the drama of everyday life. We note that this approach is actually how tabloids came to existence. We tend to forget that before the 1960s, gossip magazines did not focus on the glamorous life of Hollywood, but rather concentrated on the slanderous, spicy stories about celebrities and also plenty of news about average people. Celebrity stories were covered, but were not

the main focus. Burning social issues and “self-help” stories definitely overruled celebrity pieces (Sloan, 2001), but over time, tabloids started to pay more attention to celebrities. Due to our synthesis of the literature, we wondered whether stories in tabloids focus on Reputation Gossip, or if they also contain Strategy Learning Gossip to better guarantee their audience interest. We tested this idea by way of a short content analysis.

### **Hypotheses**

We presume producers of mass media gossip want to maximize their target audience, and reach the widest possible audience. Therefore, we predict that:

*Hypothesis 1: Most mass media gossip will deal with Strategy Learning Gossip about adaptive problems rather than about topics that cannot be linked to themes of evolutionary psychology.*

Due to the negativity bias we further predict that:

*Hypothesis 2: The content of mass media gossip will focus more on negative news (teaching how to avoid danger) than positive news (teaching how to achieve success)*

For stories about unknown individuals (i.e., average, non-celebrity individuals), we further predict that the emphasis on Strategy Learning Gossip, and the negativity bias, will be greater, due to the focus on “what” rather than “who” is involved.

*Hypothesis 3: Mass media gossip about unknown people will solely be Strategy Learning Gossip, mostly about adaptive problems, and there will be a stronger focus on negative events, as compared to Strategy Learning Gossip about celebrities.*

### **Methods**

To test our predictions, and to explore the content of mass media gossip, we conducted a multiple-coder content analysis of three Flemish (Belgian) tabloids.

#### *Materials*

The tabloids we selected were from Belgium; two were Flemish “sensational magazines,” (De Bens, 2001) *Zondagsblad* and *Blik*, and one was a Flemish “television magazine,” *Story*. At the time of this study, both *Blik* and *Zondagsblad* had a small-sized newspaper format, while *Story* was (and still is) a glossy gossip magazine. All were well-read at the time of the study: *Story* reached 741,000 weekly readers, on average, in 2002-2003, *Blik* reached an average audience of 245,000 weekly readers, and *Zondagsblad* reached 136,000 weekly readers (Media Plan, 02/03). We note, however, that these magazines were not those with the highest sales. Other Flemish magazines, such as *TV-Familie* and *Dag Allemaal*, are tabloids that reached larger audiences (e.g., *Dag Allemaal* had 1,381,000 readers in 2002-2003 [Media Plan, 02/03]). Despite their popularity, we did not include them in our sample because their content is too much influenced by the directors of the Flemish commercial broadcasting company “VTM” (Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij), and we wanted to analyze magazines that reflect the interest of an average individual. In other words, tabloids such as *Dag Allemaal* reflect the interest of a regular consumer of “VTM” television programs, not the interest of a typical citizen.

At the time of our analyses, *Zondagsblad* was edited by “Cascade” company, *Story* was edited by “Sanoma Magazines Belgium,” and *Blik* was edited by the “Edibel”

company (Media Plan, 02/03). Our sample therefore covers three magazines from different, independent publishers, which were all independent of the Belgian television channels.

Hüttner and colleagues (1995) report that 12 issues of a magazine, for example, are sufficient to sample a research population for content analysis. Hence, we analyzed a time period of 12 weeks between July 2002 and September 2002. Although 2002 is several years previous to the time frame of this article, it was selected because no special events occurred during that period that might have influenced our analysis, and because we could obtain a complete set of tabloids. Our total research population consisted of 36 gossip magazine issues (3 magazines x 12 issues). Out of this population, we selected 852 articles as research units, using the selection criterion that the main character must be a human, since gossip is always person-related. Consequently, all stories about animals and miraculous nature-events were excluded from this study.

### *Coders*

In total, 11 coders (three males, eight females) aged between 22 and 27 cooperated in this study. One main female coder (first author of this paper) led the research and trained the 10 student coders. Coder subjectivity bias is an important methodological obstacle in human coder content analysis, so to minimize this problem we developed coding questions that were simple and clear to every coder. Moreover, training sessions were organized and continued until all 11 coders obtained high inter-coder reliability (see below). To rule out an effect of familiarity with the material, different articles were used in each training session, and none of these articles were used in the actual study. With respect to coding procedure, one coder coded all 852 articles and the student coders each coded a part of the articles, so that each article was coded by three independent coders at different places and times.

### *Codebook*

A codebook was created to obtain high levels of accuracy and reliability. It consisted of two central themes: personal information about people who were the subjects of the gossip, such as their age and sex, and the subjects' celebrity-status (i.e., whether they were in a media oriented occupation or not, see below). Next, we created a list of variables to categorize the discussed adaptive trait(s) and behavior(s) of the gossip subject(s). We used simple coding instructions, asking the coders to answer the following questions: What is the sex of the subject(s) in the article – only female, only male or mixed? Is the age of the subject mentioned (yes/no; if mentioned report the age)? Does the subject have an occupation that involves media coverage (yes/no)? This item was then subject to a follow-up question: if the answer was yes, indicate which of following categories apply: entertainer, politician, athlete, royalty, and/or other, or, if the answer was no, code as “non-celebrity” and answer an additional question. This additional item was: is subject in any way related to a celebrity? (yes/no)? Finally, coders were asked to code (yes/no) whether the following categories are talked about for the subject in the analyzed story: health status, long-term relationship (described as either sexual and/or romantic), short-term relationship (described as either sexual and/or romantic), wealth status, physical appearance, parent-child relationship, family relationship, friendship, non-related other relationship, verbal and physical competition.



For each category, the coders recorded whether it was talked about in either a positive or negative sense. This distinction was not made for verbal competition or physical competition, since both always imply a negative activity. An “other” category was added to cover topics that could not be coded with the existing categories. Coders were given detailed definitions for each variable. Refer to Table 1 for an overview of definitions, as well as their relation to adaptive problems.

**Table 1.** Human Traits and Behaviors Reflecting Issues of Human Evolution For Coding Content of Tabloid Stories

<i>Adaptive Problem*</i>	<i>Problem - sublevel</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description of variable</i>
Survival (secure own survival)		Health Status	Topic is about the general health of the subject.
Mating (find, attract and guard a romantic partner, secure offspring and their survival)	Mating strategies	Long-term relationship	Topic is about long-term romantic/sexual relations.
		Short-term relationship	Topic is about short-term romantic/sexual relations.
	Mating cues	Wealth status	Topic is about social status of the subject.
		Physical appearance	Topic is about physical appearance of the subject in a positive or negative sense.
	Parental investment	Parental care	Topic is about a parent-child relationship of the subject.
Group living problems (cooperation and conflict among related and non-related individuals)	Kin investment	Family	Topic is about a kin-related relationship of the subject.
		Friendship	Topic is about a friendship (non-kin related) of the subject.
	Reciprocal investment	Reciprocity	Topic is about a relationship not involving friend or kin.
	Competition	Physical competition	Topic is about a physical conflict of the subject with any other individual.
		Verbal competition	Topic is about a verbal conflict of the subject with any other individual.
None		Other	Topic is one that cannot be coded in any of the above categories.

*Note:* \* Adaptive problems refer to problems of survival and/ or reproduction that were present throughout human evolutionary history and are still present today.

### *Coding Reliabilities*

For sex, age, and celebrity-status of the subject of the gossiped, we reached sufficient inter-coder reliability rates. The preferred reliability rates of 90% and up (Krippendorff, 1980) could not always be reached for the categories. Thus, for these

variables, we summed the codings of the three independent coders. This resulted in a 4-point scale for each variable, where 0 = “not at all present” (i.e., absent according to all three coders), 1 = “indication of presence” (i.e., present according to one coder), 2 = “present” (i.e., present according to two coders), and 3 = “definitely present” (i.e., present according to three coders). To increase reliability, we *a priori* excluded “indications of presence” from our analyses, which ensured at least two out of three coders agreed on the presence of the trait/behavior.

## **Results**

Although the focus of this study was to look at *what* is being gossiped about rather than looking at *who* is subject of mass media gossip, we first presented some exploratory results on the latter to establish context.

### *Who is Gossiped about in Belgian Tabloids?*

We found that from all 852 articles analyzed, 237 (27.8%) were about one female subject, 44 (5.2%) about multiple female subjects, 260 (30.5%) about one male subject, 44 (5.2%) about multiple male subjects, and 267 (31.3%) about both male and female subjects. Thus, male and female subjects were generally equally represented in our sample.

For the majority of the articles (60.9%) no age was mentioned. However, for those stories where ages of the subjects were reported, most (23% of all 852 articles, or 58.8% of those that included age) were about subjects aged between 19 and 45.

With respect to “celebrity-status,” we made a distinction between local (Belgian) and international subjects (refer to Table 2). Most often gossiped about are Belgian entertainers (35.1% of all 852 articles), followed by foreign entertainers (25.6%). Gossip about royalty (26.8% for foreign royals, and 3.1% for Belgian royals) was also prevalent. Of all articles, 6.8% reported about athletes, and only 0.8% of all gossip we analyzed had politicians as subjects. Lastly, 1.8% of all articles we analyzed were coded as having “other” celebrity-status subjects; these were mostly visual artists who were mentioned because of their occupation (e.g., mentions of an upcoming exhibit).

Non-celebrity subjects were the focus of 19.1% of all 852 articles. Thus, approximately 1 out of 5 articles contain gossip about a person who does not actually have an occupation that directly involves media coverage. However, the majority of these individuals are people who are connected in some manner to a celebrity. That is, they do not have a media-based occupation themselves, but are connected to a celebrity via family connections (kin), or friendship (allies). From the 162 gossip stories about non-celebrities, only 50 articles (5.9% of the 852 articles) were solely about people who have no connection to a celebrity. Note that when we later discuss gossip about non-celebrities, we are only referring to these 50 articles.

**Table 2.** Who is in Tabloid Stories According to Occupation and Nationality

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Frequency (N= 852)</i>	<i>Valid percent*</i>
Entertainer	Belgian	299	35.1%
	Other	218	25.6%
Politician	Belgian	2	.2%
	Other	5	.6%
Athlete	Belgian	12	1.4%
	Other	44	5.2%
Royalty	Belgian	26	3.1%
	Other	228	26.8%
Other	Belgian	1	.1%
	Other	11	1.3%
Non-celebrity	Belgian	101	11.9%
	Other	61	7.2%

*Note:* \* A celebrity can be classified into multiple categories, e.g., an athlete having a television show scores both on “athlete” and “entertainer” categories, which causes the sum of the valid percent to exceed 100%.

#### *What is the Subject of Gossip in Belgian Tabloids?*

We predicted (Hypothesis 1) that most topics of mass media gossip reflect adaptive problems occurring in our evolutionary past, and thus would be coded in one or more of the categories. The results (see Table 3) confirmed our prediction: only six articles (1% of all 852 we analyzed) involved a topic that could not be coded in any of the categories.

When comparing the frequency rates of the different variables, we found that almost half (53.8%) of all the articles contained gossip about the long-term romantic relationship of the subject(s). Approximately the same amount of attention was paid to their wealth status (50.4%). A third (33.3%) of all articles included talk about health status, closely followed childcare (coded as “parental care”; 31.5%), spending time with friends (“friendship”; 19.1%), and spending time with family members (“family”; 15.5%). Involvement in verbal disputes was less often reported (“verbal competition”; 13.3%), as was refusing to offer help to non-related others (“non-related other relationship”; 12.5%), and talk about one’s physical appearance (12.3%). The least attention was given to short-term romantic relationships (6.6%) and physical fights (“physical competition”; 2.8%).

#### *Is Mass Media Gossip Negative Talk?*

Each trait and behavior variable (except “physical competition,” “verbal competition,” and “other”) was also coded according to whether the gossip had a positive or a negative tone. Using a percentage test (Statistica) we calculated the significance of the differences between the number of positive vs. negative stories for each variable. Short-term romantic relationship yielded no significant difference ( $p > .05$ , see Table 3), while for health status, negative gossip significantly ( $p < .001$ ) outscored positive gossip.

For all other variables, positive stories significantly ( $p < .001$ ) outscored negative ones. Therefore, our second hypothesis cannot be fully accepted.

**Table 3.** Content of Tabloid Stories Analyzed by Frequencies of Topics and According to Positive or Negative Tone

Variable	Presence (valid %)		Proportion (N=852 articles)		p*
	Overall	Positive	Negative		
Health status	33.3%	9.9%	23.4%		.0000
Long-term relationship	53.8%	38.8%	15.0%		.0000
Short-term relationship	6.6%	4.0%	2.6%		.1059
Wealth status	50.4%	40.3%	10.1%		.0000
Physical appearance	12.3%	11.0%	1.3%		.0000
Parental care	31.5%	29.7%	1.8%		.0000
Family	15.5%	13.3%	3.2%		.0000
Friendship	19.1%	13.1%	.6%		.0000
Reciprocity	12.5%	11.7%	.8%		.0000
Physical competition**	2.8%	2.8%			
Verbal competition**	13.3%	13.3%			
Other**	1%	1%			

Note: \* Using Statistica to measure difference between two proportions

\*\* No difference between positive vs negative tone was apparent for these variables

#### Who Did What: Are Different Topics Present for Celebrities and Non-celebrities?

We compared the frequencies of the various topics for those stories containing *only* information about celebrities versus non-celebrities. Out of the 852 articles, 739 were selected, which included the 50 articles that discussed only non-celebrities and 689 articles that discussed only celebrities. We then compared the positive vs. negative tone for each trait or behavior variable (see Table 4).

Topics that occurred with similar frequency in stories about celebrities and non-celebrities were *positive* talk about long-term romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, family, friendships, and reciprocity, and *negative* talk about family.

**Table 4.** Frequencies of Trait and Behavior Categories for Celebrities vs. Non-celebrities of Tabloid Stories

Category	Celebrities	Non-celebrities	p*
	(N=689)	(N=50)	
	Valid %	Valid %	
Health status positive	10.4%	2.0%	.0000
Health status negative	19.3%	9.0%	.0000
Long-term relationship positive	35.2%	28.0%	.3021
Long-term relationship negative	14.2%	26.0%	.0243
Short-term relationship positive	3.9%	0.0%	.0000
Short-term relationship negative	2.3%	8.0%	.0163
Wealth status positive	43.9%	6.0%	.0000
Wealth status negative	9.3%	30.0%	.0000
Physical appearance positive	12.0%	0.0%	.0095

Physical appearance negative	1.6%	0.0%	.3678
Parental care positive	26.1%	38.0%	.0648
Parental care negative	1.2%	10.0%	.0000
Family positive	12.2%	12.0%	.9667
Family negative	3.0%	8.0%	.0578
Friendship positive	12.6%	22.0%	.0586
Friendship negative	0.1%	6.0%	.0000
Reciprocity positive	12.9%	12.0%	.8543
Reciprocity negative	0.3%	6.0%	.0000
Competition physical	0.6%	38.0%	.0000
Competition verbal	11.4%	44.0%	.0000
Other	0.1%	0.0%	.8230

Note: \* Using Statistica to measure difference between two proportions

In general, mass media gossip about celebrities was more positive than that for non-celebrities, as we predicted (hypothesis 3). There was more positive talk for celebrities vs. non-celebrities in stories about wealth status (43.9% vs. 6.0%;  $p < .0001$ ), physical appearance (12.0% vs. 0.0%;  $p < .0001$ ), health status (10.4% vs. 2.0%;  $p < .0001$ ), and short-term romantic relationships (3.9% vs. 0.0%;  $p < .0001$ ). There was, however, more negative talk about celebrities' physical appearance (1.6% vs. 0.0%;  $p < .0001$ ).

Issues that occurred more in gossip about non-celebrities than celebrities were negative talk about health status (90.0% vs. 19.3%;  $p < .0001$ ), wealth status (30.0% vs. 9.3%;  $p < .0001$ ), long-term relationships (26.0% vs. 14.2%;  $p < .0001$ ), parent-child relationships (10.0% vs. 1.2%;  $p < .0001$ ), short-term relationships (8.0% vs. 2.3%;  $p < .0001$ ), friendship (6.0% vs. 0.1%;  $p < .0001$ ), and reciprocity (6.0% vs. 0.3%;  $p < .0001$ ). There were no topics discussed in a positive tone more often for non-celebrities than celebrities. Finally, for non-celebrities, there was more gossip about their verbal competition (44.0% vs. 11.4%;  $p < .0001$ ) and physical competition (38.0% vs. 0.6%;  $p < .0001$ ).

We then ranked the frequency of each trait or behavior variable according to celebrity vs. non-celebrity status (see Table 5). The top ranked gossip topic for celebrities was wealth status, discussed using a positive tone (appearing in 43.9% of all 689 articles with celebrity-only subjects). That is, tabloid gossip about celebrities was most often about their wealth status and how they achieved their fortunes. Other top ranked topics about celebrities include talk about their successful long-term romantic relationships (35.2% of all 689 articles), their good parental behavior (26.1%), and gossip about their positive reciprocal actions (12.6%), which mostly discussed the fact that a celebrity had donated money to charity, or helped out charity programs. There is considerable positive talk about their favorable relations with friends (12.6%) and family (12.2%). Two frequent topics that were discussed in a negative manner are their health (19.3%) and unsuccessful love affairs (e.g., break-ups and troubles in long-term relationships; 14.2%). Verbal disputes with others ("verbal competition"; 11.4%) appeared fairly often.

**Table 5.** Top 10 Trait and Behavior Categories, By Valid Percentage, For Celebrity vs. Non-celebrities in Tabloid Stories

<i>Celebrities (N=689)</i>		<i>Non-celebrities (N=50)</i>	
Wealth status (positive)	43.9%	90.0%	Health status (negative)
Long-term relationship (positive)	35.2%	44.0%	Verbal conflict
Parental care (positive)	26.1%	38.0%	Parental care (positive)
Health status (negative)	19.3%	38.0%	Physical conflict
Long-term relationship (negative)	14.2%	30.0%	Wealth status (negative)
Reciprocity (positive)	12.9%	28.0%	Long-term relationship (positive)
Friendship (positive)	12.6%	26.0%	Long-term relationship (negative)
Family (positive)	12.2%	22.0%	Friendship (positive)
Physical appearance (positive)	12.0%	12.0%	Family (positive)
Verbal conflict	11.4%	12.0%	Reciprocity (positive)

The top ten topics in articles about non-celebrities were different from those about celebrities. The most popular topic for non-celebrities was negative talk about their health (90.0% of all 50 articles). The negative health status (i.e., fitness) of non-celebrities was practically a necessity for them to become a subject of mass media gossip. Furthermore, unlike celebrities, both positively and negatively toned topics were equally present for non-celebrities. Verbal and physical disputes were often reported (44.0% and 38.0%, respectively), as were the topics, discussed negatively, of their poor wealth (30.0%), and talk about their unsuccessfulness in long-term romantic relationships (26.0%). Frequently occurring positively toned topics included their favorable parent-child relationships (38.0%), strong relationships with their long-term romantic partner (28.0%), good relationships with friends (22.0%), and with family (12.0%). Lastly, their reciprocity was included in this top ten (12.0%). Gossip about non-celebrities often reported how these individuals found support in their social network, even though they were in a life-threatening situation.

### **Discussion**

One might posit that gossip magazines are misnamed because the senders (i.e., producers) and receivers (i.e., consumers) of information about third parties do not personally interact, and consequently fail to establish a trust-based relationship that is present in the interpersonal exchanges. However, mass media gossip and interpersonal gossip are highly similar if one instead focuses on “what” comprises the content of gossip. What differs, though, is who is the subject of gossip; for interpersonal gossip the subjects are friends, foes, acquaintances, or people who are unknown to us and whom we do not know directly. For mass media gossip, the subjects are celebrities or non-celebrities individuals. Due to our one-sided parasocial relationships, the former might be stand-ins for friends and family (De Backer et al., 2007), while the latter are again people we do not know directly.

Turning to the function of gossip, we argued that gossip does serve an important adaptive role. As reviewed, previous researchers who conducted functional analyses of gossip have proposed that gossip is used to control others’ behaviour, to manipulate reputations, to gain knowledge, and/or to entertain an audience. However, we framed the

function of gossip in an evolutionary, biosocial approach, and thereby add that these uses of gossip all contribute to the fitness of those who take part (either as sender, receiver, or subject). We propose that gossip came to exist and still thrives today because of its associated survival value for the involved individuals. Thus, gossip is functional because it reflects issues related to the survival and reproductive problems that humans have faced throughout evolutionary history.

Previous studies that have looked at the content of interpersonal gossip revealed that the variety of topics (e.g., romance and conflict) can be linked to adaptive problems. These findings have not been extended, prior to our study, to mass media gossip about both celebrities and non-celebrities. Studies of mass-media gossip are scarce (e.g., Schely-Newman, 2004), and no previous research has relied up on a codebook created *a priori* that reflects adaptive problems. We addressed this issue by performing a content analysis, using such a codebook, on three Flemish (Belgian) tabloids to test whether media gossip reflects adaptive problems that occurred in our evolutionary past and which still exist today.

As reviewed, we created a list of categories to reflect adaptive problems based on the content of introductory books in the field of evolutionary approaches to human behavior. Our results show that of all 852 stories we analyzed, only six contained topics that could not be classified according to the categories we used. When looking more closely at these articles, we noticed that they involved talk about the subjects' relationships with their pets, which recent work shows has deep, evolutionary roots (Shipman, 2010). We propose that those working in gossip media would be wise to examine the categories, reflect upon how their reporting can be categorized, and determine whether they should adjust their reporting to better fit these topics.

Levin and Kimmel (1977) found that mass media gossip often deals with romantic relationships. We provide further evidence of this finding, as talk about romantic relationships appeared in the majority of the articles (60.4%) we analyzed. This focus is not surprising given that romantic relationships are faced by presumably every individual during one's lifespan, and they are central to inclusive fitness, given that reproduction often occurs within these relationships. We differentiated between long-term and short-term relationships, and interestingly, our results show that only long-term romances are given much attention. Short-term affairs were the least talked about topic in the tabloids. Further investigation is needed to clarify why these relationships are not discussed, especially because short-term sexual affairs are not rare among both men and women (see for example Buss, 2003). Media workers may want to also examine the accuracy of this finding; perhaps in 2011, our expectations and acceptance about short-term relationships were different than they are in 2002 (i.e., the publication year of the tabloids used in this study), and hence, maybe they appear more often in today's media. We can think of no evolutionary basis for the lack of attention to short-term relationships, and thus, perhaps a rationale based on social acceptability or cultural norms is needed.

Other popular topics in our study were the wealth and the health status of the subjects. Health, a topic of a third of the articles, might be the variable with the clearest link to the individual fitness of the person discussed. Other researchers (Bird, 1992; Davis & McLeod, 2003; Sloan, 2001) have documented the popularity of topics such as injuries and death in mass media gossip, and topics such as violence, murder, robbery, and vandalism. However, these were not frequent topics within the tabloids, and overall, physical aggression of any sort was quite rarely reported.

We also considered who is gossiped about in Flemish tabloids in terms of sex, age, and occupation. Our results show approximately equal attention to males and females, which is different from Levin and Kimmel's (1977) finding that males were more often (60%) subjects of stories in Philadelphia newspaper gossip columns. Further research is needed to determine whether the difference is due to changes in the way the sexes are represented over time, or if they stem from difference in medium (i.e., newspapers vs. tabloids) or nationality (i.e., Belgium vs. the United States).

In the majority of articles, the age of the individuals was not mentioned. When age was present, most of the subjects were between the ages of 19 and 45. We cannot, however, safely conclude that other age groups, such as children, adolescents, or the elderly, are not represented in tabloids because we did not estimate age for the articles that excluded the information.

Looking at the occupation of those gossiped about, most are entertainers (i.e., those involved in showbiz) and royals. Far fewer articles were about completely unknown people or politicians. Levin and Kimmel (1977) noticed an increase from 2% to 10% in gossip about politicians when they compared mass media gossip from the 1950's to the 1970's in Philadelphia newspapers. Our result of .8% does not even reach the low level they noticed in the 1950's. This result, though, is not surprising because Levin and Kimmel analyzed gossip that appeared in newspapers, while we focused specifically on tabloids. Other researchers (such as Bird, 1992, who examined supermarket tabloids) have found similar results as ours.

Not only are the non-celebrities less often the topic of tabloid gossip, the topics involving them are distinct from those about celebrities. The only similarity was that for both groups, their well-functioning social networks are discussed. In general, non-celebrities were more likely to be gossiped about when they experienced a conflict situation that threatened their life, whereas celebrities were more likely to be talked about when they achieved prestige and had a positive change in their romantic relationships. Previously mentioned studies on the content of mass media gossip have noted that topics such as violence and robbery are apparent primarily in stories about non-celebrities (Bird, 1992; Davis & McLeod, 2003; Sloan, 2001).

We found support for our prediction that audiences appear to be motivated to attend to gossip about celebrities due to the benefits of vicariously learning about others' experiences (i.e., Strategy Learning Gossip) and to learn about the reputations of their parasocial friends (i.e., Reputation Gossip). It might be the case that tabloid publishers are aware of these different motivations and already orient the stories as a result. If so, it is not surprising that gossip about non-celebrities deals more with life-threatening events from which the audience can learn survivability, as this information has a higher adaptive value than learning how to maintain or improve fitness.

We also found that, overall, most of the gossip had a *positive* tone, which is in keeping with past research. For example, Levin and Kimmel (1977) found a similar trend for American gossip columns, in that about 30% were reports of celebrities' good behavior and only 6% were explicitly about behaviors that are generally disapproved of by society. Levin and Kimmel (1977) described this distinction as being a major difference between mass media gossip and interpersonal gossip, as the latter acts as a normative tool to punish inappropriate behaviors, while the former focuses on transmitting information about the appropriate behaviors of celebrities. Our results are in line with their findings, so it is curious that casual observation indicates that gossip magazines are commonly associated with slanderous badmouthing of celebrities. A



possible explanation for this anecdotal perception might be due to the negativity bias. In general, negative information carries more weight than neutral or positive information, possibly due to both experiences and innate predispositions (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Of course, it might also have been a coincidence that our study concurred with the findings of Levin and Kimmel (1977), and thus, we must agree with Schely-Newman (2004) that research on the content of media gossip so far has been, and remains, much too scarce. A rich field of opportunities still lies ahead for future research.

*Guidelines for Those in the Gossip-Based Media Industry*

Due to the fact that this special issue is aimed at providing concrete guidelines with an applied focus, we end with a list of recommendations for the producers of mass media gossip. We note that those working in gossip-based media have obviously tapped into the benefits of attending to evolutionarily relevant topics in order to sell their products and gain audience members. Still, we have several suggestions for these readers.

First, even though we mainly focused on media gossip as a noun in this article, the issue we raised in the introduction about the distinction between gossip (i.e., more trustworthy) and rumors (i.e., less trustworthy) can help us explain why people tend to stay loyal to their “favorite” gossip magazine. It must be remembered, though, that this quest for accurate, trustworthy information will push audience members to consume multiple sources of gossip information, especially when the news is “breaking” (i.e., breaking our wildest expectations). Thus, those who produce gossip magazines should not worry that other media outlets are also covering the same headline; their magazines may still be purchased to provide confirmatory information. Likewise, consumers of these magazines should not feel guilty about buying an extra magazine, for example, when something very unexpected has happened, as it is useful to seek out multiple sources at those times.

Second, we cannot emphasize enough how important it is for those working in mass media to keep in mind the history of tabloids. In the early days, tabloids did not focus on those with prestige. Instead, they provided information, indirectly, on how people could achieve a successful life overall by avoiding disaster and maximize the chance of “living happily ever after.” As long as mass media gossip providers continue to provide information that meets this need, they will fare well despite potentially increasing competition. Our empirical results indicate tabloids do well and address adaptive problems in most, if not all, of their stories. However, one way that mass media gossip producers could improve is to move their focus from the success of celebrities and instead provide information on how they deal with disaster and interpersonal problems. The point is that all of us want to avoid the pitfalls in life, and vicariously learning from those with prestige might be particularly useful.

It is important to also mention that those entering into work related to mass media gossip will likely gain from reading about evolutionary psychology. We therefore advise these individuals to read some of the founding books in the area, or at least invest some time in learning about the adaptive approach to understanding human nature. Similarly, those who have been in the profession for a while but have not gained the notoriety they seek may also benefit from reading in this area. Alternatively, these individuals could compare our categories against the topics of their own work and see for themselves how they rate; we expect those who have a high degree of overlap have experienced more career success than those with less overlap.

Our final recommendation is oriented towards consumers of mass media gossip. Those who read gossip magazines, watch gossip-related television shows, or read gossip articles from Internet sites, for example, may feel guilty about wasting their time on a leisure pursuit. It is important to remember that gossip helped our ancestors survive, and thus by accessing gossip, one is faced with an opportunity to vicariously learn solution to adaptive problems.

There exist many exciting avenues for future research. For example, it would be interesting to examine news programs, reality television, sitcoms, and other media products that share information or contain gossip within them, and see how often evolutionarily relevant issues are presented. Perhaps the most successful shows are the ones that are the most closely associated with themes related to adaptive problems.

Although our evidence about the usefulness of using an evolutionary approach stems from an analysis of three Belgian tabloids, the fact that our list of categories, created *a priori* using themes from introductory evolutionary texts, captured so many of the stories is very telling. Our results extend previous findings on gossip within interpersonal relationships and provide insight into the differences between Strategy Learning Gossip and Reputation Gossip. It also addresses how one can benefit from gossip about someone they know, even through a one-way parasocial relationship (i.e., a celebrity) vs. someone who they do not know. These distinctions should be of use to those working in mass media gossip.

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