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Gossip in library and information service environments: results of a survey

(Plotka w środowisku usług biblioteczno-informacyjnych. Wyniki badań)

Słowa kluczowe: plotka, poczta pantoflowa, pogłoski, biblioteki nigeryjskie, Nigeria

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest wykazanie i zbadanie zjawiska plotki oraz jej skutków w środowisku usług bibliotecznych i informacyjnych. Przedstawione zostały wskazówki dotyczące redukowania pogłosek, zaczerpnięte z komentarzy i sugestii zbadanych w ramach anonimowej ankiety. Artykuł dowodzi jednoczesnej obecności pozytywnych i negatywnych oddziaływań plotki w środowisku bibliotecznym.

Keywords: gossip, grapevine, rumours, Nigerian Libraries, Nigeria

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine gossip in libraries and information service environments, and draw attention to its impacts on such organizations. This research provides information on ways of reducing gossip, comments and suggestions from anonymous survey respondents. It also shows that gossip has both positive and negative impacts in libraries.

The library as a service organization must show concerns in matters that bother on harmony, peace and cordial relationship. It is not out of place if library management would always strive to identify any negative situations that may disrupt service and operations with a view to providing appropriate solutions. *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of English Language, Encyclopedic Edition* defines gossip as "familiar or idle talk, groundless rumour, mischievous tattle" [4, p. 546]. Peter Vajda defines the concept as "any language that would cause another harm, pain or confusion..." [5]. These two definitions point to the fact that gossip may cause trouble at work.

Gossip is not a new word in the literature of management sciences, sociology and related disciplines. However, the concept and its impact in a service organization

like the library has not received major attention. Gossip, being a human activity thrives well among people, be it in a community, church, family, workplace and among peers. Giuseppe Labianca, Travis Grosser and Virginie Lopez-Kidwell have observed that gossip can be only helpful to people in organizations, especially when the flow of information from the top gets choked off, as often happens when companies are in crisis or undergoing changes. The authors point out that “gossip can crank up the fear level in an organization, but research shows it usually does the reverse”. The author lists the following as what happens when people share gossip:

- people make personal connections, which give them social and emotional support,
- valuable information is disseminated and
- provision of information on adherence to group’s norms.

The authors comment that when managers say gossip is “unprofessional”, they are really saying that when staff show up for work, they expect them to leave behind the emotional and social part of who they are. But “conclude that it is impossible for staff to leave their humanity at the door”. The summary of the authors on this is that “gossip is inevitable because it serves as a great diagnostic tool” [2, p. 28-29].

Stephen Robbins in his contribution adds that “there is evidence that about 75% of the information that flows among grapevine is accurate”. He gives the purpose of rumours as:

- to structure and reduce anxiety;
- to make sense of limited or fragmented information;
- to serve as vehicle to organize group members and possibly outsiders into coalition;
- to signal a sender’s status [3, p. 318-320].

Peter Vajda sees gossip as essentially a form of attack, which often arise from an individual’s conscious and unconscious fears. He adds that stopping the practice of “talking about others” is challenging for many. Reflecting on his experiences on workplace situations where gossip was a norm, the author proffers this solution: “To be free from inflicting this workplace violence from others, we need to explore and heal the split between outer self and inner self, then can we live honest, sincere and responsible lives in the workplace...”[5].

Most features that exist in business organization are present in the library. Susan Klingberg observes that “libraries have many of the same elements as the organizations... set performance goals, and operate with a staff hierarchy” [1, p. 102]. Gossip is an integral part of library work life, just as it is an important aspect of organizational experience and almost everyone has had some personal experience with or involvement in, gossip matters, either as a senior or junior staff in any type of library. Even after sectional or committee meetings, informal group discussions and gossips have arisen. This article brings gossip out of the closet, its purpose being to examine the presence of gossip in seventeen libraries in Kwara and Ogun States,

Nigeria. It particularly addresses what people perceive as gossip, incidences of positive and negative impacts, whether helpful or subversive. The study aims to offer some preventive measures and management methods that can help reduce, but not eradicate gossip at work. The article relies to a large extent on the information provided in the work of Giuseppe Labianca, Travis Grosser and Virginie Lopez-Kidwell [2]. Such information proved very helpful in the preparation of the questionnaire.

The present study lays no claim to investigate all the instances or occurrences of gossip in the targeted population and indeed libraries in Nigeria. The investigation covered the period 10th November to 31st December, 2010.

Four goals were identified for the study. They were:

- Goal 1: The primary goal of the study was to collect information related to gossip in libraries and information service environments and the views of the two categories of library staff on whether or not they gossip at work.
- Goal 2: The second goal was to analyze and interpret the data and information in order to provide suggestions or recommendations for consideration by managers in different libraries on how to handle gossip.
- Goal 3: The third goal was to analyze the open ended questions in a thematic form in order to provide information on both positive and negative impacts of gossip in library as service organization.
- Goal 4: The final goal was to report the results to a wider generality of librarians including the participants in the study and to library professionals across different types of libraries and cultures.

Seven objectives of the study were designed to determine:

1. To what extent gossip exists in libraries and information service environments.
2. Identification of the participation of professionals and non-professionals in gossip at work.
3. The divergent views of librarians in academic, special and public libraries on the subject of gossip within libraries.
4. How gossip affect library service, operations and relationship.
5. Whether gossip is helpful or subversive.
6. Other things that gossip does in a service organization like library.
7. The views of professionals and non-professionals on what managers could do to reduce gossip.

The overall plan of the study involved the development and use of a questionnaire that focused on gossip in libraries. It was necessary to develop a new questionnaire for this study because none was available in the literature that targeted either this specific library staff or specific organization that could be adopted or adapted. The questionnaire derived from certain pertinent issues raised by Giuseppe Labianca, Travis Grosser and Virginie Lopez-Kidwell in their recent study entitled [2, p. 28-29]. Its “unprofessional” to gossip at work. The self-developed questionnaire was validated through expert advice of professional colleagues.

The questionnaire had two sections. Section A deals with respondents' biodata. Section B contains issues relating to gossip in libraries – what gossip is, whether it exists in libraries, whether staffs engage in gossip, the focus of gossip and the type of information gossip gives. It covers other issues – whether gossip is helpful, how to reduce gossip in libraries and instances of gossip experienced in libraries. There were fifteen (15) questions in all.

The totality of library staff was not used in this study. The library assistants, clerical assistants, cleaners and messengers were excluded in the samples for one singular reason. The level of their education would make it difficult to elicit information through the use of questionnaire. Consequently, the study samples librarians (staff with first and second degrees) and library officers (staff with diploma certificate in library studies). The questionnaire was administered to participants in Kwara State during the recent general meeting of the Nigerian Library Association, Kwara State chapter. The questionnaire was administered to participants in Ogun State through contact persons in various libraries.

The response rate varies in the seventeen libraries. The table below shows the response rate of libraries (arranged in alphabetical order of state – Kwara and Ogun).

The findings of the study can be categorized in six sections:

1. Libraries of respondents,
2. Respondents view of the benefits of gossip,
3. Gossip issues in libraries,
4. Difference between librarians and library officer's view of gossip,
5. Ways of reducing gossip in libraries,
6. Positive and negative impacts of gossip in libraries,
7. Comments from respondents.

Of the total 128 questionnaire administered, 88 were returned, representing 68% recovery. It is necessary to categorize respondents by libraries. Of the 88 respondents, 64 (72.7%) were from academic libraries, 19 (21.6%) were from public libraries and 5 (5.7%) were from special libraries. The professional categories of respondents were: 50 (56.8%) librarians and 32 (36.4%) are library officers. The remaining 6 (6.8%) did not indicate their status.

First, a question was asked in order to determine whether gossip exists in libraries. Twenty six librarians and 14 library officers agreed that they have been involved in gossip at one time or the other. In terms of benefits derivable from gossips, respondents to the four variables listed in the question agreed that gossip is beneficial to a library system (Table 2). This response supports the fact established by Giuseppe Labianca, Travis Grosser and Virgine Lopez-Kidwell that "gossip serves as a diagnostic tool" [2, p. 28-29].

Table 1. Response rate of libraries

Serial No.	Library	No. of Questionnaire Administered	No. of Questionnaire Returned
1	University of Ilorin, Ilorin	17	15 (88%)
2	Federal Polytechnic, Offa	5	3 (60%)
3	Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin	4	3 (75%)
4	College of Education, Ilorin	4	2 (50%)
5	College of Education, Oro	4	2 (50%)
6	Agricultural & Rural Management Institute (ARMTI), Ilorin	1	1 (100%)
7	Nigerian Stored Products Research Institute (NSPRI), Ilorin	1	1 (100%)
8	National Centre for Agricultural Mechanization (NCAM), Ilorin	1	1 (100%)
9	Michael Imodu National Institute for Labour Studies (MINILS), Ilorin	1	1 (100%)
10	College of Arabic & Islamic Legal Studies (CAILS), Ilorin	5	1 (20%)
11	National Library of Nigeria, Kwara State Branch, Ilorin	3	2 (66%)
12	Kwara State Library Board	19	17 (89%)
13	Redeemer's University, Mowe	7	6 (85.7%)
14	Babcock University, Ilishan	20	12 (60%)
15	Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye	10	6 (60%)
16	Covenant University, Otta	6	4 (66%)
17	University of Agriculture, Abeokuta	20	11 (55%)

Source: self-elaboration.

Table 2. Respondent's view of the benefits of gossip

Benefit	Number of Respondents
Gossip brings a problem to the fore	45
Gossip helps managers to know if staff is supportive	37
Gossip assists manager to know what staff are thinking	39
Gossip helps to reinforce the value of an organization	36

Source: self-elaboration.

Table 3 below shows the issues of gossip according to type of library. In academic libraries people gossip more on work-related issues than in other types of libraries while people in public libraries gossip more on organizational related issues. Incidence of gossip was not rampant in special libraries because the staff strength is usually very low. Most special libraries employ few librarians and library officers which may explain why gossip was not a common phenomenon. Even when they gossip, it is about the parent organization that the library serves.

Table 3. Gossip issues in libraries

Libraries			
Gossip issue	Academic	Public	Special
Work – related	24	5	-
Personality – related	8	5	-
Organization – related	9	6	2

Source: self-elaboration.

As shown in Table 4 below, there are significant differences between the views of librarians and library officers on the type of information contained in gossip. The number of librarians that see the information derivable from gossip as objective and subjective are more than that of the library officers. Likewise, female library personnel gossip more than their male counterparts, although the difference was not statistically significant. This supports social belief that gossip is women’s ‘pass time’.

Table 4. Views of librarians and library officers on gossip

Status of Respondents	Types of information derivable from gossip			Total
	Objective	Subjective	None of the above	
Librarian	22	21	5	48
Library Officer	13	13	5	31
Total	35	34	10	79

Source: self-elaboration.

Table 5 gives the responses to the question on ways of reducing gossip in libraries. A look at the table shows that managers need to give truthful information in order to minimize the occurrence of gossip. Respondents view this as the most crucial issue to consider.

Table 5. Ways of reducing gossip

Solutions to gossip	No. of Response
Managers should increase communication	49
Managers should focus on resolving issues	42
Managers should give out truthful information	62
Managers should sweep issues under the carpet	32

Source: self-elaboration.

Table 6 represents the perception of library personnel of gossip. A good number of respondents do not believe that gossip usually destroys the other fellow. The majority of respondents do not emphasize on the praise of others, while close to half of the respondents do not see gossip as very subversive, while almost half say there is subjectivity in gossip.

Table 6. Library personnel's perception of gossip

	No. of responses		
	Yes	No	Not sure
Gossip usually destroys other fellow	32	52	
Those who gossip give constructive views of issues of discussion	38	47	
Gossip often emphasize the praise of others	5	78	1
Gossip can be very subversive	37	35	10
There is no objectivity in gossip	35	36	10

Source: self-elaboration.

A question sought to know if respondents have experienced positive and negative impacts of gossip in their organization. Thirty eight respondents gave useful information on instances of positive impacts of gossip while 51 respondents gave useable information on instances of negative impact. The cited instances were read and grouped according to their similarities (Table 7).

Generally, there is need to solicit for comments on a vexing issue of this nature, in order to be able to proffer some useful suggestions. Provisions were made for comments from all the respondents. They were asked to volunteer comments on gossip in general. A perusal of the comments supplied by the respondents showed that gossip could be helpful or subversive, that is, it has both positive and negative effects. It is worth noting that only 37 respondents offered some comments. Some respondents maintained that gossip is detrimental to organizational growth. The comments from other respondents vary but point to either the positive or negative direction. To use the exact word of a respondent, "gossip is a means to exchange and disseminate information". Some other respondents said "lines of

communication should be opened to avoid gossip”. The other respondents expressed similar views, “gossip should be seen from the positive and not negative angle because there are lessons to be learned from it”. The last comment many agreed that gossip brings improvement in organization.

Table 7. Positive and negative impacts of gossip in libraries

Positive impacts	Negative impacts
1. Gossip brought solutions to certain problems in the library. 2. Gossip helped lazy staff to adjust positively. 3. Gossip helped management to be just and fair in handling certain sensitive issues. 4. Correct interpretation of gossip by management brought improvement on welfare matters. 5. Gossip led to promotion that could have been swept under the carpet. 6. Gossip helped to correct mismanagement. 7. Gossip influenced management decision positively. 8. It led to frequent meeting among staff to discuss burning issues. 9. It has helped in the settlement of quarrels and conflicts among staff. 10. It has helped managers to know hidden truth. 11. Gossip about my dressing has helped to improve my appearance.	1. Gossip has destroyed relationship. 2. Gossip has caused disaffection in libraries. 3. It has fuelled disunity among staff. 4. Gossip had effect on productivity of staff. 5. Gossip degenerated to animosity and acrimony. 6. Made library managers to develop blood pressure. 7. Gossip not properly managed created some problems. 8. Misinterpretation of gossip created problems for management. 9. It almost destroyed our organization.

Source: self-elaboration.

The findings as reflected in the comments of respondents are similar to those of [2; 3; 5]. Though expressed in different words, the authors maintained that gossip that spreads false information can have its place and can be beneficial. Also, that managers should bear in their mind that gossip will always exist, so they must learn to cope with and manage it.

The primary objective of the study was to determine the existence of gossip in libraries and information service environments. This was achieved by collecting relevant information on this issue from two categories of staff in the libraries studied. Although this modest study is clearly a small step toward finding out

the effect of gossip in service-oriented organizations like libraries, it has further confirmed that gossip is an integral part of libraries, just as it is in other organizations. Some respondents to the survey identified occasions when gossip had negative impacts on them and the library system. Also, participant's responses to the comments section of the questionnaire gave some hint that gossip has both positive and negative effects on libraries. Of interest to the authors is the result of the study as it affected the topics of gossip in libraries. Topics or issues of gossip in academic libraries as revealed in this study are work-related. Such information emanating from gossip needs to be properly handled to avert its possible negative effect on service and operations.

The study has, however, also shown that without adequate communication from the top, the level of gossip will be high in libraries. This study, as far as it goes, has confirmed that gossip exists in library and information service environments, having examined its occurrence in libraries.

The suggestions that emerge from the study are that:

1. The best and most effective approach to dealing with gossip is to improve on organizational channels of communication. There was a general recognition that where communication channels are choked off, gossip is the only conduit for carrying important news or information.
2. Library managers should welcome damaging gossip, as it has its place and can be beneficial. Consequently, careful attention must be paid to the bits of data that 'trickle down it'.
3. Library managers should learn to use the information emerging from gossip as diagnostic tool of the problems of staff and what they are thinking about the organization.
4. Library managers should see gossip as one of the emotional and social parts of employees. Thus, they should strive to use gossip as an advantage.
5. Library managers should take more interest in gossip that carry negative information about the organization, as this is capable of undermining the organizations ability to function.
6. When gossip degenerates to conflict and animosity, it should be properly handled rather than avoided, because if it persists, it deepens and affects inter-personal relationship and productivity.
7. Employees on their on part must also know how to handle the information they pick from other employees.

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Appendix: Sample Questionnaire

Gossip in Library and Information Service Environments

Dear Respondent,

This study is being conducted by a team of librarians in Kwara State and Ogun State. Its intent is to learn about gossip in library as a service organization.

The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. Thanks very much for your participation.

Yours faithfully,

B.R. Akangbe (Mrs.) & others

Section A: Demographics

1. Name of Library:

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2. Status: Librarian ☐ Library Officer ☐

3. Sex: Male ☐ Female ☐

4. Age: 20 – 30 ☐ 31 – 40 ☐ 41 – 50 ☐ 51 – 60 ☐
61 and above ☐

Section B

5. Gossip is merely the exchange of information between two people about the third, absent person. Yes ☐ No ☐
6. Do you gossip at work? Yes ☐ No ☐
7. If yes, is your gossip related to:
Work (i.e. service, operations, etc.) ☐
Personality (e.g. leadership) ☐
Organization (i.e. policy) ☐
8. In your opinion, what kind of information do you think gossip gives? Tick as appropriate
Objective information ☐
Subjective information ☐
None of the above ☐

9. Do you think gossip helps in any way? Yes ☐ No ☐

10. If yes, in what way? Select from the list below.

Gossip helps to bring problems to the fore ☐

It helps managers to know if staff is supportive ☐

It helps managers to know what people are thinking ☐

It helps to reinforce the value of an organization ☐

11. What do you think gossip is mostly devoted to?

Praise ☐

Constructive criticism ☐

Destructive criticism ☐

None of the above ☐

12. How do you view gossip generally?

Helpful ☐

Subversive ☐

I don't know ☐

13. How do you think gossip could be reduced in your organization?

(Tick as many as apply)

Increase communication ☐

Focus on resolving issues ☐

Give out truthful information ☐

Sweep issues under the carpet ☐

Operate open administration ☐

14. Can you site a positive impact of gossip you have experienced?

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15. Can you site a negative impact of gossip you have experienced?

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16. Please comment freely on gossip in library as service organization

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