

We all love a good gossip — especially about the peccadilloes of others. But it's not just harmless fun, it's totally toxic

# India Knight



**T**he actress Olivia de Havilland, who is no less than 101, is suing the makers of a TV drama series for portraying her as a gossip. Her lawyer says that her character in *Feud* — about the rivalry between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in the early 1960s — is “completely false” and creates the impression that de Havilland was “a hypocrite, selling gossip ... criticising fellow actors, using vulgarity and cheap language”. She is seeking damages for emotional distress and economic losses.

Such a strange thing, gossip. It's the axis around which much of life spins, from childhood friendships to office politics to the latest convoluted drama on *Love Island*. It's how you form an opinion of people you've never met, whether they're celebrities or the people across the road. It's the bait you dangle when you want attention: “You'll never guess what...” And of course it's the whole internet, if you want it to be. You could spend your entire life living in a mad, false world of gossip and barely come up for air.

One of the many odd things about gossip is that in order for it to function properly, we all have to pretend we live a morally impeccable life and that X or Y's alleged peccadilloes are profoundly shocking to us. This faux-puritanism is total nonsense, as is the idea that an inveterate gossip might be some sort of noble truth-teller. They're usually somewhere between “slightly slippery” and “ew”. Not that it makes any difference. Gossip is currency and we all want a bit. There was an extended period of time when it seems all my friends and I said to each other was “Any gossip?”

Gossip oils the wheels of society because what other people get up to is fascinating, whether that's hogging all the toys in the sandpit, stealing someone's boyfriend or having suspiciously inflated vegetables at the village produce show. My teenage daughter's feelings about school on any given day are based largely on who said what to whom and what they may or may not have gotten up to — the



whole thing repeated and amplified through social media.

Bullying often has its roots in gossip, or perhaps gossip has its roots in bullying, because of course that's what gossip really is: it's very rarely designed to flatter the person being gossiped about. The idea is usually that they'd be upset to find themselves discussed in this way. The more upset we think they'd be, the more thrilling the gossip, which inevitably means the best gossip of all is about people's intimate lives. Putting that bluntly, gossip is hideous — and yet, when it concerns someone you dislike or despise, you fall upon it with delirious joy, cackling that it has the “ring of truth” even when it clearly doesn't. No one is immune to a really juicy

piece of gossip. We all long to adjudicate over other people's lives.

Until it's about us. But even then, we're so used to having our privacy violated in any number of ways (including by our own hand) that we're blunted. Cumulatively, though, this relentless blunting — the endless having to shrug things off, grow a pair, not be a snowflake — erodes our own self-worth. It's why everybody is so terribly anxious, and also why so many young people have such poor self-esteem: we don't necessarily feel we're worth protecting. What I love about de Havilland taking exception to being portrayed as a gossip is that, aged 101, she still values herself enough to go: “No, you can't say that about me, actually. I'm not having it.”

In the real world, the only sane thing to do with gossip is to ignore it. Maybe de Havilland is monumentally self-regarding and so narcissistic she won't have a word said against herself. But I'm thinking not. I'm thinking this very old lady knows that ultimately you're all you've got, and that you need, always, to look after yourself ■  
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