

THE COLUMNISTS

WSJ. asks six luminaries to weigh in on a single topic. This month: Gossip.



JUDY SMITH

“I don’t believe that gossip and the truth are mutually exclusive, but even when gossip is truthful, or semi-truthful, it can be counterproductive. As a crisis manager, I’ve seen families broken apart, reputations torn to tatters. We live in a 24-hour news cycle, and in my work we’re always putting out fires—I’m continually surprised by the speed at which gossip moves. But sensation sells. The juicier the gossip, the more readers a story attracts. Facts are becoming obsolete. We always prepare our clients for various scenarios, for the scrutiny of the media spotlight; it’s essential they remain focused and avoid paying attention to the other stuff. Professionally, I’m known for my discretion, and this line of work has made me even more sensitive to the value of privacy. I try to remain mindful of that.”

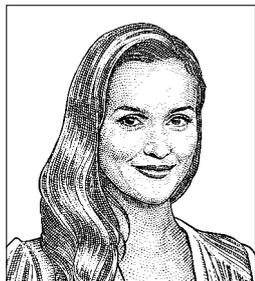
Smith is founder and president of Smith & Company, a strategic advisory firm.



MICHAEL MUSTO

“I used to sit on the stoop with my family and the next-door neighbors and dish about others in the neighborhood—what they wore, who they were dating. I was a very shy child who rarely spoke, but I really felt like I’d found my home on that stoop. Gossip was a way to bond with others by the proverbial water cooler. But gossip doesn’t only have to be fluff. It also sheds light on profound aspects of human behavior. A lot of times we’re learning by negative example—this is how you should not lead your life. The biggest gossip story of the modern age has to be Brad dumping Jennifer for Angelina—in tone, it was almost like a Greek tragedy. You had the matinee idol, the good girl and the temptress. Because, of course, celebrities do everything in a bigger way, including messing up. But there’s always the next chapter when they rise up again and we cheer them on.”

Musto is a journalist.



LEIGHTON MEESTER

“I’ve never lived for gossip, but I get it. It’s only human to want a little bit of something that’s bad for you, whether it’s chocolate or alcohol or a piece of juicy gossip. But, like anything, gossip in excess can become increasingly addictive. To some extent, gossip is pleasurable for the very same reasons we enjoy watching movies and TV—it’s a fantasy of sorts, a close-up look at someone else’s life. But it’s important not to get too caught up in what’s said about *you*—especially if it’s coming from people you don’t know, because they only see one small side, the side you choose to present. It can be really hard on women, particularly for women in the public eye. You might begin to nitpick your looks or your personality. That’s why it’s essential to surround yourself with a warm, nonjudgmental circle.”

Meester is an actress who currently stars in Fox’s Making History.



JON BROD

“Gossip is more dangerous than ever. The nature of it hasn’t changed, but the distribution of gossip—the way it spreads—has been completely transformed. The ubiquity of email and messaging has changed everything. Until recently, gossip was similar to a game of telephone, passed from one person to another over coffee. Relying on spoken word to deliver gossip made it move more slowly, kept it contained to a local community. It even fostered a healthy dose of skepticism as the story changed slightly from person to person. Today, gossip—and sensitive communication more broadly—is an indelible part of our global digital footprint. It’s always a few taps away from being shared by millions of people via social media. That’s why we started Confide. What you communicate digitally—even good-natured gossip—should remain as secure as the spoken word.”

Brod is co-founder and president of Confide, a confidential messaging app.



FAITH EVANS

“We’re all guilty of engaging in gossip to a certain extent. It’s in our nature to want to share something that you’ve seen or heard with a friend. It’s the intention that matters, whether it’s hurtful. Gossip is definitely a part of the entertainment business, but I was prepared for it even before I knew I wanted to become a recording artist. My mom was the type who said, ‘Forget what they say,’ so I’ve always had the attitude that what people think about me is not my business. There was a period of time after my husband’s [the Notorious B.I.G.] death where there was endless gossip surrounding his passing and our relationship. So I sought out a media coach, not because I felt I was saying the wrong thing, but because I felt like I didn’t owe people everything. She assured me that there was a way to take control of the conversation. I’ve never let gossip change my perception of myself.”

Evans is a musician. Her latest album, The King & I, is out this month.



ROBIN DUNBAR

“The original meaning of the word *gossip* refers to something positive, the idea of hanging over the backyard fence and chatting with your neighbors about pretty much nothing—it’s about building relationships with members of your community. But gossip has acquired a secondary, negative meaning as well. Malicious gossip derives from the fact that we like to make sure that our friends and neighbors are toeing the general community line. You have to remember that the kinds of societies that we, as well as our monkey and ape cousins, live in are really a form of social contract. We agree to work together to solve problems for our successful survival. But in order for that to work, we have to be prepared to give up some of our more selfish interests, so having a mechanism like gossip that allows us to police other people’s behaviors becomes important.”

Dunbar is a professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford.