Review: ArchivalGossip

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Project

ArchivalGossip

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Project URL

<https://www.archivalgossip.com/>

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Project Overview**Selina Foltinek and Katrin Horn**

ArchivalGossip is the digital outlet of an ongoing American studies research project, “Economy and Epistemology of Gossip in Nineteenth-Century US American Culture” (2019-2022). With a focus on realist fiction, life writing, and magazines, the project explores the role of gossip’s tacit or collective knowledge in an era marked by shifting perceptions of privacy and publicity, increased economic volatility, and new notions of gender and sexuality. The accompanying website consists of the project’s blog, a sources page, annotation and user guidelines, and—the biggest element—a digital database of selected objects of study collected from various archives (such as the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, and Pennsylvania Historical Society). The database, still a work in progress, collects letters, diaries, articles (from archives and online databases), cartoons, photographs and paintings, and auto/biographies, as well as information on people and events.

The collection *Cushmania* is currently the fastest-growing subset of data within the database. It documents the public reception and private life writing of actress Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876). Cushman is one of the project’s key case studies for thinking through the role of gossip (as both source of information and object of study in its own right) in women’s increasing participation in the public sphere. She was the first U.S. actress to become renowned on both sides of the Atlantic, living in the U.S., England, and Rome. Her same-sex relationships as well as her gender-bending performances and attitude required Cushman to manage her reputation carefully. Analyzing the intimate knowledge of gossip, the project seeks to illuminate how

Cushman, her social networks, and the wider public shaped and perceived her reputation in ways that reconciled the open secret of her sexuality with her international celebrity. Since gossip relies on networks, the project stores, sorts, annotates, and visualizes multiple documents in relation to each other. The database facilitates work with different media formats and traces relational agency of female actors in diverse ways: chronologically (timelines), geospatially (mapping), and according to research questions (exhibits and tags).

From the WordPress website, users can access the front end of the Omeka content management system. We collect metadata according to Dublin Core Standards and additional, customized fields of item-type-specific information. We deploy another digital tool, Transkribus, to transcribe handwritten documents from the 19th- and 20th-centuries semi-automatically, and thus include an increasing number of full-text transcriptions on item pages. Providing free access for all users, the website addresses scholars who are interested in the project's digital objects, metadata, or archival research methods, as well as non-professional users searching for information about Charlotte Cushman and other 19th-century historical agents who were part of Cushman's circles: actors, sculptors, and editors, among others.

ArchivalGossip was developed and is maintained by project director Katrin Horn (queer and gender studies, cultural and media studies), research associate Selina Foltinek (gender and queer studies, history), and temporarily employed [student assistants](#).

Project Review

Molly Mann

In 1887, [an article in the *Brooklyn Times Union*](#) described writer Grace Greenwood (the pseudonym of Sara Jane Lippincott) as a “social lion, being constantly entertained by the leading families in England,” based on intimate knowledge from a “private letter.” Greenwood, a staunch advocate of women's rights and challenger of gender roles, was able to achieve this lionized status through the public disclosure of similar private intimations, or gossip. Throughout the 19th century, gossip offered women an acceptable, albeit subversive, entrée into public life. ArchivalGossip does important work as a digital archive of the economic and epistemological uses of gossip in U.S. literature and culture during this period. As part of the German Research Foundation-funded project, “Economy and Epistemology of Gossip in 19th- and Early 20th-century

Literature and Culture," the collection presents materials and generates research around the women who leveraged gossip as a tool for navigating an inhospitable public sphere and creating new knowledge within it.

Built using WordPress, the website allows users to view a variety of letters, diary entries, articles, cartoons, and digitized images, all of which attest to the fluid and varied uses of gossip as both social capital and subversive tool. Users can access individual items directly or browse through thematic exhibits. Individual item pages display standardized metadata, descriptions of content and context, and transcriptions of handwritten archival documents. The project also includes provenance, citation information, social bookmarks, and geocodes, and allow users to export items through a variety of output formats. More interactive ways that users can access collection items include thematic timelines that present materials chronologically and maps that present a geographic view of item locations. This allows users to see a broad, transatlantic view of gossip's role in cultural meaning-making. The maps landing page also features a useful tag cloud that presents the collection's most salient topics. Among the most prominent of these tags are "social capital," "public intimacy," "respectability," and "gender norms/bending," revealing a scholarly curation of materials.

Many of the exhibits and materials center around one figure in particular: Charlotte Cushman, the first U.S. actress to garner transatlantic fame. Cushman's same-sex relationships and manipulation of gender norms required careful attention to her reputation, a performance that is evident in materials from her life. In their preface to the archive, the project team presents Cushman as a case study for understanding how gossip features in women's participation in public life. The Cushman archive that Horn and the team have built in ArchivalGossip presents a powerful temporal, spatial, and personal account of how gossip functions as both social currency and a tool for knowledge production. The prospect of expanding the collection around additional 19th-century women like writers Anne Hampton Brewster and Grace Greenwood is a promising one.

ArchivalGossip expands our understanding of gossip as a creative social tool, rather than a mere personal indulgence. More importantly, we see through the materials gathered in this archive how gossip has shaped U.S. culture and women's role within it from the 19th century onward. Although the archival materials are for a primary audience of scholars in this area, the blog that accompanies the collection has potential for engaging audiences outside academia by distilling, for example, the

“Euphemism Challenge: A (growing) list of the best, worst, and—quite frankly — weirdest descriptions of Cushman’s relationships (with friends as well as lovers).” The most recent post on this blog is from November 2019, and more frequent updating would foster more regular engagement. For historians and scholars of women’s and queer culture, especially, the archive offers a valuable and interactive digital resource for exploring questions of agency, queer encoding, public intimacy, and cultural knowledge production.

Editorial Note: The directors of Archival Gossip provide the following additional information on the project.

Recent blog posts, including a conference report, an analysis of gossip in *Ladies' Home Journal*, and a series of comments on "Working on Intimate Knowledge with Archival Documents" are accessible [here](#); a second collection, "Gossip Columns and Columnists," with the exhibit "[Gossip in Print](#)" was been added to the database in 2021.