

An obligation of conscience: Gossip as social control in an eighteenth-century Flemish town

Abstract

This article investigates how gossip developed as a tool of social control in eighteenth-century Kortrijk, an average-sized town in Flanders. Through gossip, people influenced others' behaviour, by performing social norms, by punishing violators of norms, by publicising the punishments of these deviants, and finally, by spreading information about improper behaviour, possibly leading to other sanctions. Previous research has insufficiently considered how the effects of gossip as social control were influenced by the historical situations in which it occurred. Most notably, the decline of honour and the formalisation of social control altered the ways in which people could effectively use the power of gossip, as in the second half of the eighteenth century, gossip was less a direct deterrent of deviant behaviour, but became more important in formal control settings.

Keywords: deviance, formalisation, gossip, power, social control

Gossipers were often frowned upon by eighteenth-century moralists. In the *Hollandsche Spectator* the gossipmonger was called a “despicable swine” and the Brabant priest Jacob Claes compared tattlers to manure collectors, dung flies, moths and scavengers.¹ Their remarks seem to contrast sharply with the ideas of twentieth-century scholars of gossip, who claim that gossip has important functions in society.² Surprisingly, however, some eighteenth-century moralists also saw positive uses for gossip. They noted that, in certain cases, spreading information on the improper behaviour of others could be permissible, and even virtuous. The seventeenth-century French priest Charles Gobinet, whose work was translated into Dutch and enjoyed numerous reprints in the Austrian Netherlands, wrote that it was not a sin “to speak of another’s sin, when it is to his good, or to prevent the hurt of others”. In such cases, it was even “a charity” and “an obligation of conscience”.³

Introduction

Although gossip is omnipresent in many cultures past and present, it is only in the last two decades that historians have discovered it as an interesting research topic.⁴ Gossip, they revealed in the wake of anthropological and sociological research, had important functions or consequences in society. It was an instrument for maintaining relationships and group coherence, relieving tensions, gaining influence and policing social norms. Gossip was linked to neighbourhood, community, street culture, and power.⁵ One particularly fruitful area of research investigated its power as an instrument of social control. Not only historians of gossip, but also historians of social control and social scientists studying the phenomenon posited that gossip served to enforce social norms.⁶

In gossip, they argued, people presented social norms. Gossip therefore created a feeling of what was normal and what was expected. Moreover, through gossip, reputations were made, and the

importance of reputation was stressed. People had to conform to social norms, or were expelled from informal social networks. In this way, gossip taught and enforced community values. However, while these studies showed how gossip operated as social control, they did not discuss whether and how this function evolved through time. So, while there have been several studies to analyse the historical development of social control, there have as of yet been no studies to clarify what the role of gossip in this development could be.⁷ Indeed, there have been few studies to examine in a more general way how the practice of gossip has evolved over time.

This is where I want to contribute: I will investigate how people exercised social control, and therefore power, through gossip in the Flemish town of Kortrijk throughout the eighteenth century, and how the operation of gossip potentially changed. Special attention will be devoted to the interaction of gossip with other forms of power, particularly to what has been called ‘formal social control’, exercised by the state. Doing this, I will show how the consequences of gossip are tied to larger historical processes.

When historians refer to social control, they usually apply a definition proposed by historian Martin Dinges, who in turn based his definition on sociologist Donald Black’s: social control is “all practices by which historical agents define deviant behaviour and react to it by taking measures”.⁸ This definition is, in my view, neither conceptually clear nor very workable. Social control should be *control*: complaining about a drunk’s behaviour in a personal diary, is of course not social control. Yet it is a definition of deviance. Social control should also be *social*: reacting to the deviant behaviour of my neighbour, who is trying to hit me, by defending myself, without anyone else knowing, is not social control either. Yet again, it is a measure against deviant behaviour.⁹ It is more useful, I think, to conceive of social control as a form of power, the power to influence the behaviour of others by explicitly or implicitly referring to social norms. This power can take many forms: threatening or warning someone, punishing violators of norms, telling others about deviant behaviour, filing a complaint or condemning someone.

An interesting distinction is often made between formal and informal social control.¹⁰ Formal social control is exercised by written permission from the state: town guards, police officers, judges and public prosecutors on duty are all actors of formal social control. They generally refer to norms as ‘the law’. Informal social control is exercised by actors not sanctioned by the state. One of the most common instances of informal social control is, of course, gossip. While this is of course not a clear dichotomy, the distinction allows to conceptualize broad transitions over time. One of my main objectives is therefore to analyse how an informal practice of social control, gossip, interacted with formal instances of social control, such as litigation.

When discussing gossip, scholars often have difficulties to define exactly what they are talking about.¹¹ An often used working definition is that gossip is a generally negatively evaluative exchange of information about the behaviour of absent third parties, involving a bounded group of persons in a private setting.¹² What constitutes a ‘private setting’ should not be taken too narrowly: gossiping can,

of course, occur on a market square; however, speaking about others in a public meeting or at a trial, usually does not constitute gossip. The negative evaluation of behaviour discussed in gossip, provides a strong link with its effect of social control.

Social scientists have posited several theories on the operation of gossip. The pioneering work of Max Gluckman and theoretical reflections by anthropologist Sally Merry and sociologist Jörg Bergmann are the most relevant studies for my purposes.¹³ They showed that gossip is pivotal to sustain social norms and works as part of a larger framework of social control. Most recently, social scientists have added to these ideas: they claimed that gossip is a “cheap and efficient solution” to the “free-rider problem”: gossip is a low-risk punishment for people who do not obey social norms, for instance by disproportionately using community resources.¹⁴

I will adapt these theoretical insights to a historical situation. Eighteenth-century Kortrijk, a town located in the southwest of Flanders near the French border, in the present-day Belgium, is an excellent case to study gossip and social control. Eighteenth-century towns have as of yet received little attention from gossip historians. Kortrijk was an average-sized town in the Southern Netherlands, with close-knit neighbourhoods. People watched each other scrupulously and gossip, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, passed quickly.¹⁵ One woman even claimed that “gossip or defamation is so common there, that there is a saying *Cortrisaenen rasiaenen* [inhabitants of Kortrijk are drivellers]”.¹⁶ While such claims were not unique to Kortrijk, they demonstrate that gossip was a manifest concern. Moreover, in the later eighteenth century, Kortrijk’s aldermen were particularly active in policing the town and guarding the welfare of its citizens, thus complicating my analysis of social control.

To study how gossip worked in Kortrijk, I use files from the town’s legal archives. I analysed witness statements in trial records and judicial investigations. The aldermen of Kortrijk acted as judges in civil and criminal cases in the town and its county. In total, records of 3552 of the trials they heard in the eighteenth century have been preserved. I chose to investigate the trials that gave a large and relatively free part to witnesses, leaving them an opportunity to convey gossip, which upon preliminary analysis led me to exclude more technical cases concerning inheritances, debts, payments or fraud, which formed the majority of the civil cases. Of the remaining 382 cases, I selected the ones concerning inhabitants of, or events in, the town itself (as opposed to its county), which finally resulted in 157 trial records. 58 of these were criminal trials, initiated by the public prosecutor, the bailiff, who presented his evidence before the judges. The procedure could be accusatory, for minor cases, or inquisitorial, for cases with expected corporal punishment or imprisonment. Physical violence (23 cases) and theft (13 cases) were the most common criminally prosecuted offences. In civil trials, the litigating parties themselves gathered evidence for their cases, which the aldermen evaluated. Of the 99 selected cases, most common were cases concerning insult (22) and demands for alimentionation or marriage after a child had been fathered (21).¹⁷

Besides the actual trial records, I also investigated judicial investigations.¹⁸ These preliminary inquiries were conducted by two of the judges, with the purpose of gathering all relevant information

needed for a criminal or civil trial, or for assessing a request of confinement. Several testimonies were recorded, and witnesses were more at liberty to speak their mind than during the official inquest, as there were no fixed questions. Ca. 380 eighteenth-century inquiries have been preserved, 125 of these concerned events in or persons from Kortrijk itself. The precise object of the investigation was seldom specified, but testimonies often concerned violence, general misbehaviour and indecency.

Upon this selection, I carefully read the selected cases, looking for hearsay testimonies, testimonies on gossip sessions and explicit remarks about gossip. Most common were hearsay testimonies: in 48 of the 157 studied trial records and 44 of 125 judicial investigations at least one witness based some of his or her information on hearsay. This was often explicitly stated, possibly on instigation of the judges, as hearsay was in principle not valid as evidence.¹⁹ It could, however, provoke further investigation and as hearsay was quite often written down in the records, it was apparently not considered entirely superfluous.

More elaborate references to gossip sessions (“While talking on the street with... about...”) or to ideas about gossip were much less common. In only 12 trial records and 7 judicial investigations did I find such remarks. This detailed information was probably usually not relevant enough to be written down or even asked. The judges were, after all, investigating legal matters and not gossip habits. Only one trial was explicitly about gossip; four or five others referred to it together with more tangible offences, such as public slander or insult. The one trial that did have gossip as its object, concerned gossip in a letter in 1730.²⁰ This is not surprising: the origin of oral gossip was after all, as had been noted by social scientists, notoriously difficult to trace back to specific individuals.

Ever since Carlo Ginzburg’s seminal *The inquisitor as an anthropologist*, similarities between anthropological field notes and the records of early modern interrogators have been celebrated.²¹ There are of course obvious differences that should be considered too, as has been discussed by Ginzburg and others: unequal power distributions in trials, resulting in suggestive questions and strategic answers, and distortions by scribes obfuscate the actual spoken words.²² We should, when investigating gossip, also consider that what people say they said is often not what they actually said – not in everyday life, and particularly not in court. Elizabeth Cohen discusses this problem in a recent article. Early modern historians, she argues, can never find “pure” orality. She therefore proposes the notion of “situated oralities”, which implicates that records of oral speech historians find are always influenced by the specific circumstances of the situations in which it was uttered and recorded. From this point of view, she concludes, trial records are very useful sources that may provide many insights in the lives of common men and women, despite their shortcomings.²³ People’s statements may not always precisely match what actually happened, but we can assume that what they told was, unless we have indications of the contrary, plausible to the judges and to themselves, and may therefore reveal commonly expected practices. While people testified about hearsay and gossip sessions for their own reasons, to evade responsibility, to put themselves in a favourable light, or to put someone else in a bad light, and while I will always try to uncover these hidden motives, it is still possible to use these

statements to clarify how, when and where gossip was assumed to take place and what its expected effects were.

To be able to discuss larger historical developments and uncover everyday practices of power, I will carefully analyse the specific circumstances in which comments on gossip were made, questioning why people said the things they said or did the things they did.²⁴ This approach is similar to the method of “thick description”, as proposed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1973 and appropriated by many historians since.²⁵ My approach is more directly inspired by the recent work of Niko Besnier on the anthropology of gossip. In his *Gossip and the everyday production of politics*, Besnier brings together the analysis of microscopic everyday interactions and macroscopic transformations of society. Through case studies of different incidents, Besnier shows how politics and power are produced through gossip in a distinctly domestic way, while at the same time presenting vivid insights in the everyday sorrows and joys of the Nukulaelae islanders he studies.²⁶

While I cannot call upon years of participant observation, and while my analysis in this short article can never be as thorough as Besnier’s, I aim to analyse and present my material in a similar fashion. After this introduction, I will present four case studies, each of them revelatory for the historical embeddedness of the everyday effects of gossip in the larger societal transformations of honour, power, social relations and social control. I selected these cases because they are telling examples and cases about which I was able to gather much information, which enabled me to provide the proper contextualisation to interpret their meaning in broader eighteenth-century society. My larger claims are, of course, also sustained by other qualitative and occasionally quantitative data. At the end of this article, I will connect the different topics discussed in the case studies to formulate a conclusion on the relation between gossip, power and social control in eighteenth-century Kortrijk.

A house of whores

The power of gossip in eighteenth-century Kortrijk cannot be properly understood without referring to the central importance of honour. Honour has been defined as a right to respect, and is in some form present in every society. ‘Having honour’ is the result of negotiations between the claims of a person and his or her surroundings. How these claims are made and evaluated, and what the effects are of having honour or not, can of course differ.²⁷ In this section, I will analyse honour in Kortrijk mainly through a case of gossip and slander from 1711, in which the value of honour is particularly well articulated. First, however, I will clarify the situation of the events I am about to discuss.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Kortrijk counted about 11.000 inhabitants. The town was internationally reputed for its production of high quality linen and damask. As a border town, however, Kortrijk was marked by the frequent wars of the seventeenth century and the accompanying quartering of soldiers. The War of the Spanish Succession, which broke out in 1702, did not spare Kortrijk either. Initially, Kortrijk was taken by the French, upon which life in the town remained

relatively quiet, but when the town was reconquered by Habsburg troops in 1706, it became a hub of military actions, due to its strategic position by the river Lys. On average, 6,240 soldiers were quartered in Kortrijk between 1706 and the end of the war in 1713. This enormous increase in population and the French capture of neighbouring cities Ghent and Bruges led to grain shortages from 1708 to 1710. Although the situation enhanced from then on, tensions between citizens and soldiers remained high until the end of the war.²⁸

Amidst these troubling events, Christiaan Huyghe went to court. In 1711, the innkeeper instituted proceedings against Anna Tanghe, the wife of a surgeon. According to Huyghe, she had publicly uttered “enormous injuries” to him and his daughters. Moreover, she had gossiped that his house was a “whorehouse” and that she had an order to let him and his family be chased out of town, and “many other defamations and injuries”. As a consequence, he claimed, “many honest folks and citizens were shunning his house”, resulting in loss of profit. By proceeding against her, he wished to restore his damaged honour by acquiring a public revocation of her slanderous words.²⁹

His claims accentuate the importance of honour in eighteenth-century Kortrijk. Honour was so important, that he and many others were willing to bear the burdens of a legal trial to defend it. Honour was, as another litigant put it much later, in 1765, “more precious, more priceless and more valuable than any other thing”.³⁰ The importance of Huyghe’s complaint is that he indicated why his honour was so important: people avoided contact with a man who could not defend his honour, or at least, he thought the judges would deem this plausible. They kept away from his establishment, not because they thought Tanghe’s allegations were true (in which case he would have attracted a large, albeit rather different clientele), but because they did not wish to associate with a man who could not uphold his and his family’s honour. Honour was therefore, in the early eighteenth century, not only a code of conduct, but a code of public performance. Huyghe claimed to be honourable. When his honour was challenged, he had to publicly counteract the challenge in order to keep his honourable status.

Although very revealing, the Huyghe case is somewhat atypical. In the first place because the insults contained allegations of improper sexual morals. Such insults were, in Kortrijk as in most of Northern Europe, usually reserved for women. Male honour, and male insults, usually focused on financial reliability and trustworthiness, with popular insults as “traitor”, “false friend” and “rogue”.³¹ The case is also unusual in another respect: no physical violence had been involved. When honour was challenged, men often resorted to a fight to restore it, especially in the early eighteenth century.³² The case of Michiel Vandenborre, merchant in flax, in 1740, clearly shows the ritual of violence attached to the defence of honour. Vandenborre had insulted Pieter Malfait, master mason, at a neighbourhood gathering. Malfait, however, replied that “it were fine men, who undressed their wives and tied them up in the attic and whipped them.” Vandenborre was furious and challenged Malfait to a duel behind the town walls. Luckily, other neighbours intervened and they both drank a beer to reconcile. Later that night, however, Vandenborre’s anger about the insult had apparently not cooled down, for while

drinking another glass with Malfait, he stabbed him in the chest and ran off.³³ Although the ritual of reconciliation failed, which fits the pattern of a decline in the public defence of honour I will discuss below, it is clear that all parties knew the ritual of challenges and reconciliations.

Huyghe, however, did not fight. This was largely due to the fact that his honour was being challenged by a woman, whom he could of course not challenge to a duel. According to Tanghe's defence statement, he had, however, shouted several "abominable insults" and threatened to murder her husband "in his own house". There is another reason why Huyghe did not actually commit violence. Although he claimed Tanghe had insulted him and his daughters in public, most of her actions consisted of gossiping. As gossiping was an indirect challenge to honour, it did not as frequently cause violence. It was only after two of his customers, soldiers who lodged at Tanghe's house, told him of her slander, that he could take action. These soldiers also testified in the trial. When other soldiers went to Huyghe's inn, they had heard Tanghe say "the officers are going to the whorehouse again". "If it weren't a whorehouse", she supposedly added, "they wouldn't be able to sustain their nine children." In another instance, the soldiers asked Tanghe's daughter to fetch some beer at Huyghe's inn, but Tanghe forbade it, saying they shouldn't send her daughter to that "house of whores and bitches".³⁴ These were serious challenges to Huyghe's honour, but because he only indirectly heard of them, a physical confrontation was evaded. Gossip was, as a consequence, a relatively safe weapon to punish others, a point which has recently been stressed by social scientists.³⁵

Contrary to insult or slander, gossip was a private matter, an indirect challenge of honour and could in this way be more powerful, as the target could not as easily defend him- or herself. As one eighteenth-century commentator put it, gossipers were "thieves of honour".³⁶ This is one of the reasons of the poor moral standing of gossip. Because of its bad name, however, gossiping put one's own reputation on the line as well. By gossiping, someone could be marked as a tell-tale or gossipmonger, which could in turn lead to their exclusion from information networks. People were well aware of this possibility, as the despised gossipmonger was a common character in contemporary popular literature.³⁷ Even gossip was therefore not an entirely safe weapon to use.

In the Huyghe case, honour had proven to be a vitally important, but very precarious matter. This made gossip a very powerful weapon. As a consequence, Huyghe pressed charges, despite the difficulties. He was partially successful: the judges condemned Tanghe and Huyghe both to publically renounce their respective insults. The costs of the trial were split between them. Furthermore, the aldermen prohibited them, on pain of imprisonment, to insult each other again in the future.³⁸

The wicked treasurer

The War of the Spanish Succession had not only put great strain on Kortrijk's population, it had also emptied the treasury of both the town and the crown. In 1705, at the height of the war, a young man called Joseph Louis Coppieters, son of Kortrijk's treasurer, convinced the central Habsburg

government, which was desperate for the money he offered, to make the position of treasurer of Kortrijk hereditary. As a consequence, the Coppieters family held the position until the end of the *ancien régime*. Until 1755, Joseph Coppieters himself was bestowed with the office. The town council was not so pleased with this settlement. It required them to pay Coppieters a salary, and Coppieters used the position mainly to increase his own wealth. This resulted in numerous trials against Coppieters for suspected corruption and blackmailing. One trial, though, judged behaviour of a very different kind.³⁹

In 1727, Marie Blomme, Coppieters' former maid, accused him of having 'deflowered' her. According to her testimony, he forced her to sleep with him, and involved her in unusual sexual practices: after some time, they also had anal sex and Coppieters asked Blomme to flagellate him while he dressed up as a nun. His only fear was that other people would hear about these indecent practices. According to Blomme, he said she had to wear religious clothing, "because people would otherwise start to say something". When the inevitable happened and Blomme became pregnant, people started talking anyway. Coppieters sent Blomme out of town, promising to give her money. When he did not fulfil his promise, Blomme returned to demand her money. Coppieters refused to pay, locked Blomme away in his house and coerced her to sign a document in which she declared that "people said that she had been impregnated by him, Coppieters, but that she didn't do it with him."

With his actions, Coppieters shows the workings and limits of gossip as an instrument of social control. Gossip was not only a statement of social norms, it was also a powerful instrument of social control, making people adapt their behaviour. Because he valued his reputation, Coppieters feared gossip about his relationship with Blomme, which led him to take numerous precautions to prevent anyone from knowing what was going on. Eventually, it even obliged him to end his relationship with Blomme and chase her away, ending his deviant sexual behaviour. However, gossip spread anyway: people were apparently saying that he had impregnated his maid. Once again, Coppieters adapted his behaviour to save his reputation, and attempted to prove his innocence. So, it is clear that because people valued their reputations, gossip was a fearsome tool of social control, which did influence people's conduct. It did not, however, necessarily bring them to admirable behaviour.

After having obtained Blomme's signature, Coppieters released her and took to the offensive. Now, he tried to use gossip for his own ends. He wanted to make sure Blomme would be silent and leave, so he let his clerk Nollet spread the rumour that she was a whore and that Nollet himself had slept with her. He sent anonymous letters to the priest to complain of Blomme's indecent behaviour and had three dummies in her image put up on the central square. Underneath was a caption, which read: "Watch this ugly skin, it looks Coppieters' whore akin."⁴⁰

Again, Coppieters showed the power of gossip. People feared gossip for a good reason: it could indeed destroy reputations. In gossip, it was suggested that people were not – "actually" – honourable. Gossip therefore contested claims to honour, and honour was, as I have shown in the previous section, of the utmost importance. Coppieters tried to use gossip to destroy Blomme's

reputation by suggesting she was a whore. If this gossip had indeed spread and Blomme had been widely considered to be a whore, she would have been unable to claim any money whatsoever. Gossip could have a deep impact on people's lives.

Fed up with his slander and false promises, Blomme sued Coppieters to obtain alimentionation. In the following inquiry, Coppieters' attempts at defamation, forgery and bribery were all exposed. The judges heard several people whom Coppieters had attempted to bribe to testify against Blomme. Even Nollet eventually declared he had not slept with Blomme, but had been forced by Coppieters to say so. Coppieters was convicted and had to provide Blomme with financial support for the care of their child. He remained in function as treasurer, however. Though Joseph Coppieters was afraid of gossip, he ultimately emerged relatively undamaged, thanks to his elite position.

Gossip was a powerful instrument of social control, influencing people's behaviour, because they *feared* gossip would destroy their reputation. Despite these fears, the punishment of loss of honour through gossip was, however, not always effective. To be most effective, gossip had to circulate in a community in which an individual's reputation was indeed important.⁴¹ I have found that gossip often circulated among family members, neighbours and colleagues, and these were the groups on which many individuals were most dependent.⁴² Outsiders were usually ill-affected by gossip. The elite, and Coppieters among them, did not encounter too much problems because of gossip among their neighbours of lower standing. This became even more the case in the later eighteenth century.

The man who touched his daughter

In 1779, it was said in Kortrijk that Carel Verbeke, a thirty-six year old workman, had improperly touched his own daughter. By then, however, Kortrijk had become a different town. After the trial of Joseph Coppieters, the town remained relatively quiet until the vicious winter of 1740. For the first time in the eighteenth century, Kortrijk witnessed a popular uprising, mainly directed against wealthy merchants, who were blamed for the high grain prices. In several of their houses, grain was stolen and they were harassed in the streets: their clothes were torn, their wigs torn off and one merchant was even thrown in the river.⁴³ Although there was no extreme violence, due to economic malaise in the linen industry, turmoil continued next winter and soldiers were sent to keep the peace.⁴⁴

Shortly afterwards, the War of the Austrian Succession brought even more soldiers to Kortrijk. From 1744 to 1749, Kortrijk resorted under French rule. The problems for Kortrijk were mainly economic: the export of linen was hampered and profits diminished by a third.⁴⁵ Once more, quartering of soldiers put even more strain on the population.

Although exports recovered after the war, the linen industry was on its way back. After 1770, the popularity of Kortrijk's damask dwindled. The new production of *siamoise*, a mixed fabric of flax and cotton, compensated some of the losses. Textiles were still the main source of work for the majority of the population. As its revenues decreased, poverty in Kortrijk rose. Prices increased

significantly faster than wages. A year after a poorhouse was erected in 1774, a fifth of the town's population had already appealed to it for support. In 1794, this number had mounted to a third. By lack of funds, support remained insufficient.⁴⁶

The increasing poverty put a strain on local solidarity. As the population of Kortrijk grew to 14.000 by the end of the century, the face of the town changed. The town's elite, consisting mostly of wealthy merchants, often retreated in their own neighbourhoods and even when they lived among lower-status citizens, they were no longer interested in them.⁴⁷ As vertical solidarity decreased, horizontal solidarity became all the more important. To ensure this solidarity, the idea of shared social norms and enforcement of these norms – social control – were vital.

The strain on solidarity led to a lower tolerance for the wrongdoings of neighbours.⁴⁸ People closely watched each other, as is particularly well demonstrated by Mrs. Hofman's case in 1783. Her husband was not at home when an observant neighbour saw an "oddly dressed" clergyman enter the house. Mrs. Hofman had a reputation of lasciviousness, so he had "the curiosity of taking a ladder to look through the roof tiles" and indeed, he saw Hofman and the supposed clergyman hug each other intimately.⁴⁹ Although this is an extreme case, Kortrijk's legal archives contain many more examples of neighbours scrutinizing each other's behaviour, thus facilitating control.⁵⁰ Again, gossip also had an important role to play in spreading the acquired information.

Let us get back to Carel Verbeke in 1779. Probably following a complaint or request of confinement, two of Kortrijk's aldermen conducted a "preparatory information" into his behaviour.⁵¹ The statements by his neighbours and colleagues make clear Verbeke did not behave as they wanted. He was often without work and passed his time drinking and chasing women. Many deponents not only told what they had experienced themselves, but also reproduced local gossip. They had heard that Verbeke maltreated his wife and children. It was said that he corrupted the morals of the youth by having a woman undress while they were watching. Rumour had it that he had committed indecencies with a maid, and, finally, even that he had committed "impurity" with his own daughter.⁵²

Verbeke seemed not to have cared about all this gossip. When he was questioned, he denied all allegations, but did not refer to any attempt to counter the gossipers. Apparently, he did not fight his loss of honour and his resulting status as an outsider. A possible explanation for this behaviour is that, as some historians believe, the importance of public honour declined in the late eighteenth century.⁵³ Reputation did remain important, but it depended less on public showing, neighbourhoods or crowds and more on written documents, profession, rank and good works. Shaming rituals, insults and gossip therefore had less influence on people's behaviour. This thesis seems to be supported by a marked decline in the number of trials about insults in Kortrijk in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ Furthermore, there are no traces of charivari or other collective sanctions in that period.

Nevertheless, there are problems. Other historians have found that public honour and shame remained important, even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁵ Indeed, the older model of public honour was not simply superseded by a newer one, and violent reactions to insults continued to disturb

the new preoccupation with written documents and good works. Attention must also be paid to the different experiences of different social groups. It has been argued that the literate elite became less interested in honour and shaming, and that honour disputes were consequently less a priority at court and shaming punishments all but disappeared. The elite combatted collective sanctions, which they deemed irrational. People from other social groups then looked for other ways to settle their disputes and exercise control. Nevertheless, for many of them honour remained something they valued highly.⁵⁶

It was therefore not unusual that even in the second half of the eighteenth-century, people from lower social groups violently defended their honour. In 1780, innkeeper Pieter Van Mandere still thought it necessary to shout at Theodor De Caluwe on the central square that he was a “scoundrel and rogue” and that “the central square was for honest folks and not for him.” De Caluwe reacted by filing a complaint against Van Mandere.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the number of reports of public honour disputes declined drastically. Prosecuting became a more acceptable way to settle conflicts. As a result, in 1754, when the buyer of a bedstead who discovered lice in his newly-acquired piece of furniture engaged in the charivaresque ritual of shouting in front of the house of the seller for multiple hours, this was seen as inappropriate. The seller sued his customer and was found in his right.⁵⁸

Summarizing, public honour disputes did not disappear in the late eighteenth century, but their importance diminished. The defence of honour was no longer considered vital, especially by higher social groups. This also explains why the number of trials on insult diminished: the judges, who were part of the town’s elite, were no longer interested in these cases.⁵⁹ The question remains what the role of gossip could be in these new circumstances. I have already demonstrated that for gossip to be an effective tool of social control, people needed to value their public reputation – this is why gossip did not immediately influence Verbeke’s behaviour. Sociologist Jörg Bergmann has argued that gossip was therefore only effective as social control in so-called primitive “shame cultures”. In modern society, with its formalised social control, gossip was no longer important.⁶⁰ Similarly, anthropologist Sally Merry has suggested that mobile individuals with more connections outside the local community experienced less damage by gossip and that, consequently, in complex (read “modern”) societies gossip had less influence.⁶¹ In eighteenth-century Kortrijk, honour remained important at least for the middle and lower social groups and they were still strongly attached to their local community, so in this case, their thesis is not entirely relevant. But there is another reason why it does not hold up: in the second half of the eighteenth century, gossip became more and more important in formal social control settings.

Impropriety in church

Historians have detected some long term trends when they studied social control. For a long time, Western history since the late Middle Ages was seen as a process of formalizing social control. The rise of the state, claiming always more competence and striving for a monopoly on violence, left less

room for informal forms of social control based on honour, such as charivari or ritual insult. There was some debate on the precise timing of this formalisation, but most authors agreed that in the eighteenth century, a process of juridification (*Verrechtlichung*) took place: more and more often people called on the law for social control.⁶²

In the past decades, some historians have adjusted this view. Formalisation of social control is no longer seen as a linear process. There is more attention for informal social control in modern society. Processes of *Verrechtlichung* went hand in hand with processes of *Entrechtlichung*: for certain aspects of life, for instance, conflicts of honour, people called on the law less frequently.⁶³ In this final section, I will investigate how gossip continued to play a role in formal control settings through a case of misbehaviour in 1780.

After the War of the Austrian Succession, the government in Kortrijk was not going to let things be. Following the example of other eighteenth-century towns, they began to actively beautify the town. The old town walls were demolished, roads were broadened and the first parks were laid out. Inspired by the enlightenment, the government also started to enforce several measures for people's safety and comfort: fire safety regulations were established, street lighting installed, and closed sewers constructed.⁶⁴ Moreover, the aldermen of Kortrijk took the forefront in battling pubs and drinking, diligently corresponding with the central government for stricter legislation in the 1780s.⁶⁵

Kortrijk's government further increased its grip on its citizens by professionalising its methods of policing. The traditional vigilant patrol was replaced by a professional night's watch in 1768.⁶⁶ To combat the increasing pauperism, all sorts of measures were proclaimed, measures which greatly increased the control of the local government over its citizens. The establishment of a poorhouse in 1774 – Kortrijk was the second town in the Southern Netherlands to found one – was only one of them. Begging and vagrancy were banned and the town experimented with compulsory employment.⁶⁷ Confinement in houses of correction became an all-round solution for problems with all sorts of deviants.⁶⁸

Probably the most telling feature of the increased power of the government was the rise in criminal litigation. The number of trials initiated by the bailiff, the public prosecutor, increased significantly in the second half of the century: 80 trial records have been preserved from the first half of the eighteenth century, which increased to 130 in the second half.⁶⁹ Moreover, inquiries became much more extensive. More witnesses were heard and questions that were legally less relevant became commonplace. It is therefore characteristic that in 1780, a relatively minor incident of drunken debauchery led to an extensive trial.

On Ash Wednesday 1780, a few people who had revelled the night before, decided to go directly to the early mass. They were too drunk to behave and made a racket. Suddenly, one of them felt the urge to smoke and could not think of anything but to use the church's candles to lighten his pipe.⁷⁰ Three of the noisemakers were criminally charged with "misbehaviour". During the inquiry, at least sixteen witnesses were heard. A large part of their testimonies consisted of what other people had

asked them, what they had heard from others, and even remarks on the suspected falsity of some of this gossip. The investigators kept asking questions and interrogating new witnesses, and the scribes kept writing their answers down extensively.⁷¹

These findings suggest a strong increase of the power of the state, represented by the local government in Kortrijk. As the importance of honour declined for some, as I have discussed above, and as criminal litigation increased, it seems that social control indeed formalised in Kortrijk in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁷² This formalisation, this increase in state power, was however neither wholly realised top down, nor a successful disciplining of the people by the elite. For its exertion of control, the state was still very dependent on its subjects, who used the tools offered by the state to their own ends.

One of the ways people did so, was by requesting or supporting the confinement of relatives, neighbours or friends. The number of so-called “collocations” in houses of correction increased greatly throughout the Southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century, especially among the poor.⁷³ In the case of Carel Verbeke, his mother was quoted, by someone who had heard this from his wife, who was a friend of hers, saying she “would gladly give [her] signature to have him confined in the bridewell”.⁷⁴ It is not unlikely that the investigation into his behaviour, and his subsequent apprehension for questioning, were the result of a request of confinement.⁷⁵ Usually such requests capitalized on the prejudices of the judges, claiming the troublemaker was idle, drank and threw all his money away, which almost always guaranteed success. As honour became a less powerful mechanism to exert social control, relatives, neighbours and friends sought for alternatives to influence the behaviour of their peers. Requesting the confinement of troublemakers was such an alternative.

Other options were available as well. The frequent and thorough judicial investigations provided a platform to voice diverse concerns. By filing a complaint with the bailiff, or by testifying in a trial or investigation, people influenced the course of justice. The role of gossip in this new context should not be underestimated, as the case of Ash Wednesday once more illustrates. Word of the incidents had spread quickly. Of the sixteen witnesses that were heard, nine stated they had either heard gossip or gossiped themselves about the events. The tales they told and heard apparently differed from the versions told by eyewitnesses. Not only had the accused been noisy and smoking, they had, so it was told, also been drinking jenever in church. Moreover, some men were supposed to have taken women on their lap. One of the witnesses had even been asked “whether it was true that they had stood on the pulpit, and that another man, dressed as woman, had been in the confessional, as they had heard saying”. While the story became more and more extreme, the moral meaning of the events became more and more clear: a moral consensus was reached that the noisemakers had behaved improperly in a religious building.

Not everyone was happy with this twisted story. Marie Van Haesbrouck was cited by several gossipers as trying to adjust the story. Apparently, she told that “there had been great trouble in the church, but that people said more of it than there had been.” She particularly stressed that there had

been no drinking in church. Because she figured so prominently in gossip conversations, judges sought her out and heard her. She became the most important witness for the trial and her version of the events was eventually accepted as the only true version.⁷⁶

As this case shows, even in a setting where formal social control became more important, gossip was still influential. First of all, gossip spread information about behaviour. When more people knew about supposed improper acts, the chances that this would lead to, or that they would be uncovered in, a trial were much higher. Second, through gossip, people could establish themselves as authorities on a certain subject or person, leading to a pivotal role in a trial. Finally, as interrogations became more extensive, there was more room for gossip. Even though gossip was officially not legally relevant, by telling and recording this gossip, people influenced the views of the judges. The effect of gossip as social control was therefore also embedded in the way formal social control was organised: when prosecutors and judges were willing to investigate, listen to, and record gossip, its role could be much larger than has hitherto been assumed. In the Ash Wednesday case of 1780, the noisemakers were found guilty of misbehaviour, but not of drinking, in church and condemned to punishments ranging from payment of the legal costs to fourteen days of confinement on water and bread.⁷⁷

Similarly, gossip did not do Verbeke's case any good. Although judges deemed the rumours of the abuse of his daughter to be untrue (they did not enquire further about them), they became aware of many of his shortcomings. He was often idle, drank too much, could be violent and often indecent with women. He was apprehended and the questions judges asked when Verbeke was brought in front of them make clear they were convinced that he was of despicable character. Nevertheless, he was apparently released (pending further investigation?), as a few months later, he was tried on suspicion of theft. He was arrested, but due to a lack of evidence released a few months later, having to pay the legal costs anyway.⁷⁸ Eight years later, Verbeke appeared once more in the criminal records.⁷⁹ After the initial investigation into his behaviour, judges remained very suspicious. The impact of gossip could be very high, even when formal social control was at work.

Gossip and power in a changing town

In this article, I set out to analyse how the role of gossip as an instrument of social control was dependent on the contexts in which it operated. So far, scholars have all too often ignored the historical development of the consequences of gossip. While there have been many excellent studies of the functions of gossip in specific historical settings, from London to Venice, from medieval peasants to twentieth-century working-class women, there have as of yet been no studies to examine the evolution of these functions.

Gossip is and was, it has often been claimed, an instrument of social control, which I have defined as the power to influence others' behaviour by referring to social norms. I have argued that gossip could influence behaviour in four ways: by performing social norms, by punishing violators of

norms, who lost their honour, by publicising the punishments of these deviants, creating fear of violating norms, and finally, by spreading information about improper behaviour, possibly leading to other sanctions.

While these four ways of exercising control through gossip are present in many societies, their effects can widely differ. Gossip's power as a tool of social control interacts with other forms of power. Gossip was, in eighteenth-century Kortrijk, particularly related to honour. Honour, a right to respect which was publicly negotiated, was thought to be vital. It was, however, very unstable, and could easily be destroyed by gossip. The value of honour therefore ensured the power of gossip. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, public honour became less highly esteemed, at least by the higher social strata. Similarly, for these higher strata, neighbourhood life became less important. As a result, the direct influence of gossip on their behaviour decreased.

The decline of vertical solidarity in local neighbourhoods and the increasing poverty after 1770 put a greater strain on lower and middle social groups. Tolerance for improper behaviour lowered, and even among them, some did not care about gossip anymore. However, after 1750 the state, trying to increase its own power, offered new tools of social control, mainly through confinement on request and criminal litigation. This process of re-allocation of social control to the state is often called a "formalisation of the social control". Gossip's role in these formal social control settings should, however, not be underestimated. Gossip could lead to a complaint, uncover aggravating facts and influence the judges' disposition towards the suspect. Because criminal trials became more frequent and more extensive, the role of gossip in them increased in the second half of the eighteenth century. The formalisation of social control in late eighteenth-century Kortrijk did therefore not eliminate the power of gossip.

Formalisation of social control was not unique to Kortrijk. Throughout the Southern Netherlands and, perhaps, Western Europe, governments became more and more concerned with policing the behaviour of their citizens from the eighteenth century on.⁸⁰ The declining importance of public honour and neighbourhood has also been discovered in many other towns and cities.⁸¹ Kortrijk was perhaps more unusual in the thoroughness of its judges, who often conducted extensive inquiries, even in minor cases, leaving more room for gossip, especially in the later eighteenth century. The different contexts of formal and informal power in other towns necessarily leave different roles for gossip. As research on the development of the consequences of gossip through time is only starting, it can only be hoped that the interaction between gossip and other forms of power can be clarified further.

I finish by returning to the disgruntled moralists of the eighteenth century. They did not appreciate gossip. It could only be allowed in very specific cases, particularly, when it was for the better of either the person gossiped about or the broader community. Conveniently, as I have shown, gossip was a tool of social control. In all its different forms and in different power contexts, it could almost always be argued that gossip was a deterrent of improper behaviour, for the better of both the

deviant *and* the community. Gossiping could therefore most certainly be “an obligation of conscience”.

Notes

¹ Van Effen, “Agterklap,” 461; Claes, *Boere-theologie*, 220–221.

² Most notably Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal.”

³ Gobinet, *Onderwys der jeugt*, 329. Similar thoughts in: Vanden Bossche, *Den katholyken pedagoge*, 369; Van Effen, “Agterklap,” 458–459.

⁴ Already in 1985, however, Patricia Spacks published about gossip’s role in literature: Spacks, *Gossip*. More recent explorations of gossip in literature and print include Phillips, *Transforming Talk*; Parsons, *Reading Gossip*.

⁵ Wickham, “Gossip and Resistance”; Horodowich, “The Gossiping Tongue”; Cowan, “Gossip and Street Culture”; Schulte, “Gerede und Arbeit.” See also the many excellent remarks on gossip in Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community*.

⁶ Historical studies of social control that refer to gossip are e.g. Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 293; Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community*, 54–55; Vrints, *Het theater van de straat*, 124–127. Historical studies of gossip that refer to its function as social control are e.g. Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 59; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 120–121; Lipscomb, “Crossing Boundaries,” 412–414.

⁷ A fine synthesis on the history of social control can be found in Spierenburg, “Introduction.”

⁸ Black, “Preface,” xi; Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 169; See also: Roodenburg, “Social Control Viewed from Below,” 147; Vrints, *Het theater van de straat*, 99; Schwerhoff, “Early Modern Violence and the Honour Code,” 38.

⁹ See for a more thorough critique of Black’s definition Gibbs, “A Very Short Step.”

¹⁰ Spierenburg, “Introduction,” 14.

¹¹ For a good overview of the debates, see De Backer, “Like Belgian Chocolate,” chap. 1.

¹² Besnier, *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics*, 13.

¹³ Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal”; Merry, “Rethinking Gossip”; Bergmann, *Klatsch*.

¹⁴ Beersma and Van Kleef, “How the Grapevine”; Feinberg et al., “Virtues of Gossip.”

¹⁵ Hofman, “Dikwijls bespied.”

¹⁶ *Old Town Archives Kortrijk (OSAK)* 14502.

¹⁷ For a more extensive treatment of legal procedures in Kortrijk, see Monballyu, “De hoofdlijnen”; Monballyu, “Het gerecht in de kasselrij Kortrijk.”

¹⁸ Most of them have been collected in *OSAK* 3842 and 14676.

¹⁹ Monballyu, “De hoofdlijnen,” 73.

²⁰ *OSAK* 8693.

²¹ Ginzburg, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist.”

²² See e.g. *Ibid.*; Carlier, “Methodologische suggesties.”

²³ Cohen, “She Said, He Said.”

²⁴ For a more thorough discussion of my methodologies and source criticism, see Hofman, “Carel doet het met zijn dochter.”

²⁵ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. The method has most famously been used by Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*. See for a critical reflection Sewell, “History, Synchrony, and Culture.”

²⁶ Besnier, *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics*.

²⁷ Stewart, *Honor*; de Waardt, “De geschiedenis van de eer.”

²⁸ Stevens, “Kortrijk tijdens de Spaanse Successieoorlog.”

²⁹ OSAK 11448.

³⁰ OSAK 6959.

³¹ For instance in OSAK 6984; 8046; 11831; 11854; and 12517. Cf. Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 268–269; Garrioch, “Verbal Insults,” 107; Schwerhoff, “Early Modern Violence and the Honour Code,” 35.

³² Cf. Spierenburg, “Knife Fighting,” 120; Spierenburg, *A History of Murder*, 7–9; Schwerhoff, “Early Modern Violence and the Honour Code,” 34.

³³ OSAK 14177.

³⁴ OSAK 11448.

³⁵ Feinberg et al., “Virtues of Gossip”; Giardini and Conte, “Gossip for Social Control.”

³⁶ Van Effen, “Agterklap,” 460–461. Many similar sentiments were uttered by preachers throughout the Austrian Netherlands, e.g. Verslype, *Historie en overeenkominge*, 1, 2:370–374; Claes, *Boere-theologie*, 213–223; P.P.C.D., *Achterklap sonder sonde*, 2.

³⁷ E.g. De Bie, *Faems Weer-galm der Neder-duytsche poësie*, 243; Broeckaert, *Jellen en Mietje*, 59–62. See also Leuker, “Schelmen, hoeren, eerdieven.”

³⁸ OSAK 30, 270r.

³⁹ Callewier, “Wellust en bedrog,” 166–167; Maddens, “Kortrijk in de Nieuwe tijd,” 219–220.

⁴⁰ OSAK 8055; Callewier, “Wellust en bedrog.” Nollet’s testimony and the letters have been preserved and provide the strongest evidence in favour of Blomme.

⁴¹ Cf. Merry, “Rethinking Gossip,” 283–284.

⁴² Cf. Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community*; Vos, *Burgers, broeders en bazen*; Provoost, “Levende met de Lierenaars.”

⁴³ OSAK 10033.

⁴⁴ Maddens, “Kortrijk in de Nieuwe tijd,” 189–190.

⁴⁵ Vanhoutte, “Kortrijk tijdens de Oostenrijkse Successieoorlog,” 268.

⁴⁶ Maddens, “Kortrijk in de Nieuwe tijd,” 361–362; Lis, Soly, and Van Damme, *Op vrije voeten*, 109–119.

⁴⁷ Among the wealth of literature on this topic, see particularly Lis and Soly, “Neighbourhood Social Change,” 15; Wrightson, “Decline of Neighbourliness.” In Kortrijk, already in the early eighteenth century there was a trial because a wealthy family refused to participate in the costs of a neighbourhood meal: OSAK 14511. On Kortrijk’s social segregation in 1799, see Vanneste, *De pre-industriële Vlaamse stad*, 158–170.

⁴⁸ Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*, 125–137.

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- ⁴⁹ OSAK 14676/2, Informatie nopende de vrouw van Francis Hofman.
- ⁵⁰ See Hofman, “Dikwijls bespied.”
- ⁵¹ There is no clear indication of the reasons for this investigation. As no specific crimes were mentioned, the information was probably conducted following a request of confinement by a family member or neighbour.
- ⁵² OSAK 3842/1, Informatie nopende Carel Verbeke 1779.
- ⁵³ Shoemaker, “The Decline of Public Insult”; Shoemaker, “Streets of Shame”; Spierenburg, *A History of Murder*, 108–109.
- ⁵⁴ Decrease of 55 preserved trials records on insult in 1700-1749 to 16 in 1750-1799.
- ⁵⁵ Nash and Kilday, *Cultures of Shame*; Vrints, *Het theater van de straat*, 68–71.
- ⁵⁶ Cf. Sleebe, “Community and Social Control,” 177.
- ⁵⁷ OSAK 8046.
- ⁵⁸ OSAK 7602.
- ⁵⁹ Cf. Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 213–215.
- ⁶⁰ Bergmann, *Klatsch*, 193–194.
- ⁶¹ Merry, “Rethinking Gossip,” 288–292.
- ⁶² See Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 26–28; Spierenburg, “Introduction,” 14–15.
- ⁶³ Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 28.
- ⁶⁴ Maddens, “Kortrijk in de Nieuwe tijd,” 193–197.
- ⁶⁵ Cosemans, “Alcoholisme en drankbestrijding,” 117–118.
- ⁶⁶ Denys, “The Development of Police Forces,” 336.
- ⁶⁷ Lis, Soly, and Van Damme, *Op vrije voeten*, 115–116.
- ⁶⁸ Decuypere, “Het Kortrijkse Correctiehuys”; Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*. See also below.
- ⁶⁹ Niklaas Maddens, *Inventaris Oud Stadsarchief Kortrijk* (Brussels: Algemeen rijksarchief, 1999) (revised digital edition available for consultation at Rijksarchief Kortrijk). I am referring here to all cases prosecuted by Kortrijk’s bailliff, not only the ones concerning the town itself.
- ⁷⁰ This is the most credible narrative of the events, as told by Marie Van Haesbrouck, who accompanied the noisemakers, and was considered to be truthful by the judges. OSAK 14294.
- ⁷¹ OSAK 14294
- ⁷² Note, however, that as I discussed earlier, the number of trials concerning insult dropped, signalling a decline in formal social control in that particular area. This again shows that the process was not linear. Cf. Dinges, *Der Maurermeister*, 213–215.
- ⁷³ Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*, 18.
- ⁷⁴ OSAK 3842/1, Informatie nopende Carel Verbeke 1779.
- ⁷⁵ See note 51.
- ⁷⁶ OSAK 14294.
- ⁷⁷ OSAK 119, 102v-103r.
- ⁷⁸ OSAK 14271; OSAK 119, 101r.
- ⁷⁹ OSAK 119, 116r. The crime was not specified.

⁸⁰ See Rousseaux, “Histoire du contrôle social,” 268–270; Spierenburg, “Introduction.”

⁸¹ Most importantly Shoemaker, “The Decline of Public Insult”; See also Dinges, “Die Ehre als Thema der Stadtgeschichte.”

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